

THE PURIFIED VISION

THE FICTION OF WALLACE STEGNER

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John Whitacre Otis

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John Whitacre Otis

Approved by Committee:

Stan L. Bunn

Chairman

Walter E. Edge

Amberly R. Whittle

Theodore A. Stroud

Paul Blakely

Sade L. Campbell
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

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John Whitacre Otis

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Advisor: Stuart Burns

This dissertation examines the most prominent characteristics of Wallace Stegner's fiction. The controlling theme is the "purified vision" or Stegner's dedication to the principle of clarity in art. This principle serves as unifying metaphor and loose framework for a three part study of method, theme, and poetic effect.

Part I is an analysis of Stegner's first person narrators and his use of the bird motif. The discussion is concerned primarily with the first person narrators, Joe Allston and Lyman Ward, who appear in Stegner's recent fiction. They are assessed as both characters and devices in reference to Wayne Booth's classification of fictional narrators. The focus here is on point of view, the consequences and appropriateness of the first person narrator for fiction.

Part II examines a major element in Stegner's fiction, the protagonist's search for himself which usually involves him with some kind of father/authority figure on the filial, political, or spiritual levels. The broad theme of paternalism is expressed in a variety of patterns but the father and son relationships of The Big Rock Candy Mountain and the Joe Allston novels are the most significant. It is this theme of paternalism that produces the warm humanity and passionate parenthood of Stegner's fiction.

Part III marks a culmination with the discussion of the spiritual/poetic dimensions of Stegner's works. It suggests that Stegner is most evocative and poetic when working with time and his "ghosts of memory" or his "ghosts of meaning"--and that though he is "no mystic of any stripe," he nevertheless succeeds in being most mystical with non-mystical/non-spectacular means--the purified vision which in this case serves spiritual truth.

The conclusion evaluates Stegner's critics to date plus asserting the importance of this supremely versatile artist.

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INTRODUCTION

A product of the pure skies and wind-swept prairies of Saskatchewan, Wallace Stegner has always upheld the principle of clarity in his art. In his article "Fiction: A Lens on Life," Stegner claims that art should be "clear eyed" above all else, that it is the "clearest vision" the artist is after and this may "involve squinting or shutting one eye or even bending over and looking at the view upside down through spraddled legs, Japanese fashion."¹ This emphasis on clarity best defines and distinguishes Stegner's craft, philosophy, and aesthetics. Quietly resisting the more spectacular modes, he is, as one critic notes, "incorrigibly unfaddish." While others may prefer to get themselves into all kinds of contortions in seeking truth, Stegner is very seldom found looking through his legs.

Stegner's steadfast loyalty throughout his long writing career to the clear vision, the vision purged of impurities, is the critical principle which is to loosely control this thesis and to serve as a unifying metaphor and symbol of Stegner's achievement. The following study, then, seeks to examine his fiction in terms of that vision as applied to his method, to his theme, and to the poetic effect of his art.

Part I will be concerned with method. It will evaluate the most prominent features of Stegner's recent fiction--the

¹ Wallace Stegner, "Fiction: A Lens on Life," Saturday Review, 22 April 1950, p. 10.

first person narrators, primarily, and the bird symbol. Part II treats the major theme of paternalism in Stegner's fiction, the protagonist's search for himself under the influence of some kind of father/authority figure--filial, political, or spiritual. And Part III takes the measure of both method and theme in terms of their spiritual/poetic effect; it attempts to interpret his aesthetic in light of that clear-eyed vision and to discuss his more poetic works.

But first, a few facts about Wallace Stegner's life are appropriate here. He was born of Scandinavian immigrant parents in 1909 at Lake Mills, Iowa, where he lived only a few weeks before the family began its long nomadic quest. In the next twelve years the family lived successively in North Dakota, Washington, Saskatchewan, Montana, and Wyoming before finally settling in Salt Lake City in 1921. But even though they had finally settled in one place, they moved yet another twelve times within the city in those nine years of residency. Consequently, Stegner is the product of an excessively unsettled, migrant childhood. As Stegner puts it in The Sound of Mountain Water:

Since I was born in Iowa in 1909
(my home town held me six weeks) I
have lived in twenty places in eight
different states, besides a couple
of places in Canada, and in some of these
places we lived in anywhere from two
to ten different houses and neighbor-
hoods.²

² Wallace Stegner, The Sound of Mountain Water (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 158.

Stegner goes on to say that if forced to "select a hometown, I find myself selecting the city of the saints, and for what seems to me cause" (p. 159). However, in his book Wolf Willow, he seems to establish the Canadian prairie country in southwestern Saskatchewan as at least his spiritual home, the six years spent there providing him with the most significant and compelling experiences of his childhood.

Stegner was a precocious student, attending public school first in Canada and then in Salt Lake City and taking his B.A. degree in English from the University of Utah in 1930. From there he went to Iowa City, where he received his M.A. in English from the University of Iowa in 1932. Between the years 1932 and 1935 when he earned his Ph.D. degree from the University of Iowa, Stegner taught a year at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, did graduate work at the University of California at Berkeley, taught at the University of Utah, and married Mary Stuart Page. Subsequently, he taught at the University of Wisconsin in 1937, and between 1939 and 1945 was the Briggs-Copeland Instructor of Composition at Harvard University. In 1945 Stegner came "home" to the West, taking a position at Stanford University where he directed, until his retirement in 1971, the creative writing program.

Wallace Stegner's long career as both writer and teacher has brought him honor and success in a wide variety of activities. He has been the recipient of numerous grants and

fellowships. Besides the literary prizes, he received Guggenheim fellowships in 1950 and 1959. For the 1950-51 school year, he owned a Rockefeller Fellowship for teaching writers in the Far East. His lectures at Keio University in Tokyo have been collected in The Writer in America (1952). In 1955-56 he was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences, and in 1960, a Writer in Residence at the American Academy in Rome.

The Stegners have one son, Page, who like his father is also a successful novelist and a teacher of English at San Jose State University. Mr. Stegner and his wife, Mary, now live in Los Altos Hills, Palo Alto, California, not far from the Stanford campus. In the summer months they live in Vermont, which Stegner considers more "western" than California.

As for his literary achievement, The Spectator Bird, published in America's bicentennial year, marks almost forty years of Wallace Stegner's fiction, beginning with the publication of his first novel, Remembering Laughter (1937). It is interesting, too, that in 1958, C. E. Eisinger's "Twenty Years of Wallace Stegner" points out that at that time no one had attempted to "place" Stegner.³ Although Stegner's works do not offer many handles, this paper will attempt to place him at the forty year mark.

As a beginning, one might consider the years 1937 to 1950 his early phase, in which time he produced seven

³ C. E. Eisinger, "Twenty Years of Wallace Stegner," College English, 20 (December 1958), 110.

novels: Remembering Laughter (1937), The Potter's House (1938), On a Darkling Plain (1940), Fire and Ice (1941), The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943), Second Growth (1947), and The Preacher and the Slave (1950). Of these, The Big Rock Candy Mountain is easily his best. It chronicles the adventures of the Mason family and closely parallels the actual facts of Stegner's own life and family. The "Big Rock Candy Mountain" is the symbol of that paradise that lies just beyond the next mountain for the enterprising American Westerner. The book is swift-moving, episodic, and full of vivid scenes that effectively capture the "realism" of the West as Stegner lived it. Historically, it spans that period of Stegner's life from 1909 to about 1932. The remaining novels of this early period represent a broad range of topics from adulterous triangles to a fictionalized account of I. W. W. martyr, Joe Hill. Though they are slighter works than The Big Rock Candy Mountain, they nevertheless reveal a promising talent and a competent craftsman.

The next eleven years represent an interim phase in which Stegner produced two volumes of short stories--The Women on the Wall (1950) and The City of the Living (1956). Of these twenty-six stories, nine are based on episodes from The Big Rock Candy Mountain, while one is from an episode in Second Growth. Of the two volumes here, The City of the Living is probably the better. Its stories include the O. Henry first prize winner of 1950, "The Blue Winged Teal," plus "The City of the Living," "Maiden in a Tower," and

the novelette, Field Guide to the Western Birds. These stories are better developed than the somewhat fragmented slices of life from The Women on the Wall. The best of this latter volume are those stories whose source material is the same as that of The Big Rock Candy Mountain, representing the mixed blessings of a childhood influenced by both a violent father and a tender mother. Samples would be "Goin' to Town," "Two Rivers," "Bugle Song," and "In the Twilight." The first three of these are versions of episodes included in The Big Rock Candy Mountain.

Finally, the fifteen years from 1961 to 1976 represent the contemporary Stegner. His production here consists of the four "California" novels: A Shooting Star (1961), All the Little Live Things (1967), Angle of Repose (1971), and The Spectator Bird (1976). Angle of Repose won Stegner a Pulitzer Prize and is by general critical acclaim the best of these recent fictional works. It features a crippled narrator, Lyman Ward, an historian engaged in writing a history of his grandparents. The reader is entertained by both the narrator's wit-combat with his secretary and his discussion of his problems and methods as historian and novelist. The narrator's life in conflict with his ex-wife, his sociologist son, and his secretary present the "present" frame plot which interrupts the "past" central plot, the saga of the grandparents. Hence the novel presents a unique way of treating and dramatizing past and present values while its first person narrator device is considered a

structural triumph by some critics. The other California novels have in common with Angle of Repose the contemporary California setting, more specifically, the San Francisco Bay area in the sixties and early seventies. Two of these works feature the Allstons who first appear in Field Guide to the Western Birds. The Allstons, like the Stegners, are a retired couple living in the hills south and west of San Francisco.

One must remember, however, that Stegner's fiction is only a part of his total output which includes a notable body of non-fiction, reflecting Stegner's broad range of interests. Of his books to date, eleven are novels, two are volumes of short stories, and seven are books of non-fiction representing a variety of genres--history, essay, biography, and literary criticism. Of these seven, two are his "Mormon Books," The Gathering of Zion (1964), and Mormon Country (1942). The other five consist of his biography of John Wesley Powell, Beyond the Hundredth Meridian (1954); a book in collaboration with the editors of Look, called One Nation (1943), a study of race prejudice in America during World War II; The Sound of Mountain Water (1969), a collection of critical and personal essays; Wolf Willow (1955), a combination of genres--history, fiction, and personal essay; and The Uneasy Chair (1975), a biography of Bernard DeVoto. Wolf Willow concerns Stegner's return to the Whitemud country of his youth; and because it is part fiction and

one of Stegner's more poetic expressions, it is included in this study.

Besides his books, fiction and non-fiction, Wallace Stegner has been a prolific producer of magazine articles representing literary criticism, travel, ecology, environmental issues, history, and pedagogy, to name a few. Writing in 1958, C. E. Eisinger, in fact, thought Stegner more important to literary history than to contemporary fiction. Indeed, Mr. Stegner's twin interests in history and fiction have at this time won him high regard in both fields and prompted one doctoral dissertation on his blend of history and fiction, his "middle ground." No doubt Stegner's versatility will continue to pose problems for those trying to place him. But one cannot help respecting his achievement. A portion of that achievement will be a major concern of Part I: what Stegner has accomplished with his first person narrators.

PART I

METHOD: TOURISTS AND FELLOW TRAVELERS

The work of art is not a gem, as some schools of criticism would insist, but truly a lens. We look through it for the purified and honestly offered spirit of the artist.⁴

The title of Stegner's most recent novel, The Spectator Bird, suggests an image of passivity and detachment, of one who can view life without becoming involved in it. For those acquainted with Stegner's other works, it will not be difficult to recognize the irony in this image which underscores a common theme in the California novels--that to see life is to become involved. But the symbol also represents the most conspicuous features of Stegner's recent method; for the vision of a loquacious Joe Allston trying unsuccessfully to find a comfortable perch from which to view life presents at once two devices first made prominent in Field Guide To The Western Birds--the first person narrator and the bird as metaphor for man. This chapter, then, will discuss and evaluate these two devices. It will first consider the first person narrator as both a personality and a device and will then trace briefly the development of the bird image into the primary metaphor for man.

As a starting point for the following discussion, it is this writer's position that Joe Allston and Lyman Ward have

⁴ Wallace Stegner, "A Lens on Life," p. 34.

similar personalities and that as narrators they fall into the same classification--what Wayne Booth would call the first person, self-conscious, reliable narrator, one who is also a major character in the novel. He is self-conscious in the sense that he is most willing to discuss his writing chores and reliable to the degree that he represents the implied author's norms.⁵ Though these characteristics suggest the old fashioned intruding eighteenth century narrator who is not very popular in contemporary fiction, Stegner uses these "old impurities" to purify his reader's vision in a way that is fresh and original. Before considering the manner in which Stegner uses his narrators, however, this chapter will first discuss the personalities of Joe and Lyman with reference to the terms of the proposed classification: first person, major character, and self-conscious and reliable narrator.

The first of these terms has considerable consequence for the success of the novel, for in choosing the first person point of view, the writer "automatically changes author words to character words," as Leon Surmelian notes.⁶ The character of the narrator then becomes an important additional element of the work whether he stays in or out of the

⁵ Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 149-159.

⁶ Leon Surmelian, Techniques of Fiction Writing (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 66.

story. When he is a major character in the novel as are Joe and Lyman, personality becomes all the more significant. The success of the first person narrator novels, therefore, will depend to a large extent on how the reader reacts to the personality of the narrator. And Joe and Lyman are bound to get a reaction from the reader, for the most striking feature of the California novels is the force and dominance of their kindred personalities. This forcefulness compounds the natural intrusiveness of an intruding narrator and can be a source of irritation in itself. But Joe and Lyman possess redeeming virtues: a sense of humor and a lively wit plus that indispensable component of good will--the ability to laugh at one's self. These are their primary assets that outweigh or at least offset the liabilities of which sentimentality seems to be the most common charge.

These personalities present an amusing novelty in themselves, a blend of past cultural and academic and suburban values. Both Joe and Lyman are rueful, fretful, and sardonic. Old Joe snorts around in his garden and Lyman fusses with his truncated body and his wheel chair. As they stew in their own domestic juices, they give off gratuitous wisecracks that blend crudeness and sophistication. The wisecrack is for Stegner what the pun was to Shakespeare, and Stegner sometimes seems glad to lose the world for it. Nevertheless, the result is entertaining fare for the reader.

The first time we see this peculiar brand of wit, humor, and self-chastisement is the first time we see Joe Allston in

"Field Guide to the Western Birds." The major event here is the Casement party which Joe and wife Ruth attend. Actually, it is All the Little Live Things writ small--equal to the Allston's attending the LoPresti party in Part V, chapter IV of that novel. Like All the Little Live Things and The Spectator Bird, Field Guide opens on a note of grumbling self-irony with Joe, ex-literary agent, taking inventory:

But here I sit on this terrace
in a golden afternoon, finishing off
an early, indolent highball; my shanks
in saddle stitched slacks and my feet
in brown suede, . . .⁷

Says Joe in the opening pages of The Spectator Bird:

As for Joe Allston, he has been a wise-cracking fellow traveler in the lives of other people and a tourist in his own. There has not been one significant event in his life that he planned.⁸

Or in the beginning of Little Live Things:

My life stains the air around
me. I am a tea bag left too long
in the cup, and my steepings grow
darker and bitterer.⁹

Though Joe tries to maintain this gloomy self-effacement during the parties, he nevertheless is drawn into their spirit. His reports on the Casement and the LoPresti parties, indeed, are most amusing finds for the sociologists,

⁷ Wallace Stegner, "Field Guide to the Western Birds," City of the Living and Other Stories (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p. 127. Hereafter referred to as Field Guide.

⁸ Wallace Stegner, The Spectator Bird (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 7.

⁹ Wallace Stegner, All the Little Live Things (New York: Viking, 1976), p. 4. Hereafter referred to as Little Live Things.

perhaps, who are interested in the sociology of high level, mass suburban parties. All the rich pageantry of types is filtered through Joe's sardonic consciousness at the Lo-Presti's:

. . . college professors, gentleman-farmers, . . . retired generals, airline pilots, advertising men, the widow of an internationally famous oil geologist, the wife (in the midst of divorce proceedings) of an internationally famous architect, a Nobel Prize winner in medicine, and others unknown, a great swarm . . . (p. 226)

Then there is big Bill Casement hosting the party in Field Guide:

"Come on," says Bill Casement's gun club, golf course dressing room voice, "load those folks up, they haven't had a meal since 1929."

Our talk is of barbecuing . . . everybody bound to say how much he looks like a scrubbed baby. (pp. 150, 153)

A little later during the LoPresti party, Joe demonstrates his capacity for ribald humor and hi-jinks. While searching for a beer kept in an ice-filled electric cement mixer, saucy Annie Williamson all but disappears. Joe, warmed at this point by the spirits, plugs in the cord:

The mixer grated and started to turn, Annie's tiptoeing feet left the ground, her rump reared up. There were muffled sounds of bears attacking bulls and dinosaurs being gelded, and then Annie's feet found pavement and her head popped out, red, wet, and roaring. (p. 233)

Another source of amusement is the affectionate, though subterranean, battle of the sexes that Joe carries on with

Ruth in all the Joe Allston works. In Field Guide, she irritates him "close to uxoricide" (p. 130), and in The Spectator Bird she is the woman whom he "dearly loves and automatically resists." "Martial is an anagram for marital," he quips (p. 96). Ruth has keen instincts but sometimes sounds like a wheedling simpleton as she fusses over Joe. She and Joe also have a communications system that often goes awry. For instance, at one point in The Spectator Bird Joe is about to blunder into a secretive and sensitive area concerning the dark, incestuous history of the countess. But he gets an "immediate semaphore" from Ruth which said with "flapping red flags":

DO NOT SAY ANYTHING! DO NOT,
REPEAT DO NOT, ASK HER WHO HER HUSBAND
IS OR WHAT HE DOES. DO NOT SAY
ANYTHING BEYOND ROUTINE POLITENESS,
TAKE CARE. BE ALERT.

Then Joe mutters to himself:

She assumes that I have all the acuteness of a mongoloid, and so she stands on tiptoe and wigwags wildly enough to catch the attention of everyone within a half mile, and unless I give her back a signal as obvious as her own, she believes I have not only missed the original situation that set her to signaling but have somehow overlooked the fact that she is now up on the table flapping her arms. (p. 126)

Narrators Joe and Lyman are also two of our most entertaining commentators on the process of aging, our most "youthful" spokesman for the aging--or he who does not feel old, but rather "like a young man with something the matter with him" (The Spectator Bird, p. 119). Sometimes, the

by-products of their lively banter are the more sobering philosophical asides. Joe says in The Spectator Bird that

Getting old is like standing in a long slow line. You wake up out of the shuffle and torpor only at those moments when the line moves you one step closer to the window. (p. 171)

In Little Live Things Joe remarks that

Love is a carrier of death--the only thing, in fact, that makes death significant. Otherwise, it is what Marian pretended to think it was, a simple interchange of protein. (p. 91)

Other nuggets of wisdom are Lyman's comments on habit, time, and home:

My habits and the unchanging season sustain me. Evil is what questions and disrupts.¹⁰

I started to establish the present and the present moved on. What I established is already buried under layers of tape. Before I can say I am, I was. (p. 15)

Home is a notion that only nations of the homeless fully appreciate and only the uprooted comprehend. (p. 159)

Or Joe's pronouncements on guilt and cliché in Little Live Things:

. . . I believe in guilt, not as an indulgence but as an essential cauterization of the soul. (p. 187)

Maybe love and sorrow are always clichés, ambition and selfishness and regret are clichés, death is a cliché. It's only the literary, hot for novelty, who fear cliché, and I am no longer of that tribe. (p. 193)

¹⁰ Wallace Stegner, Angle of Repose (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 199.

And on age in The Spectator Bird:

I really am getting old. It comes as a shock to realize that I am just killing time till time gets around to killing me. (p. 89)

Collectively, the narrators' comments demonstrate Stegner's natural bent for metaphor, definition, ironic inversion, and aphorism or proverb--those intense and incisive tools of wit that "professors sport in," that when combined with humor, produce what Leigh Hunt calls the "richest utility to humanize the world."¹¹ When Joe teasingly tells Ruth in The Spectator Bird that "beneath this harsh exterior beats a heart of stone" (p. 41), he fools no one. Readers soon find that his heart is soft and sentimental, that he is a fellow traveler in a bewildering world, the most human of birds.

Indeed, sentiment at times verges on sentimentality in the curious ambivalence that defines Joe's attitude toward his only son, Curtis, who took his own life. It is an attitude that seems to vacillate between righteousness and guilt or self pity:

I have been guilty of making first Ruth and then Curtis into barricades behind which I could take shelter. But why couldn't he have understood the hunger and love and panic, the trembling and the cold sweats and the sleeplessness, the times when I looked at him as a child, and was overwhelmed by my responsibility to him and his dearness to me? Who broke it, he or I?

(The Spectator Bird, p. 108)

¹¹ Carolyn Wells, An Outline of Humor (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1923), p. 17.

And two critics, at least, have faulted Lyman, too, for self-pity and sentimentality. Reviewer Glendy Culligan notes that

Disfigurement can be an effective device in symbolist drama or in black comedy, but too literally rendered with attendant self-pity, it limits our empathy.¹²

Critic Edward Twining, in fact, finds sentimentality the novel's most conspicuous fault:

This particular reader cannot help feeling that it is the virtuous intensity of author Stegner's identification with his cause which misleads him into the excesses which are this novel's most obtrusive fault. That fault is sentimentality and it cannot be blinked in this book. The sentimentality here takes the form of Professor Ward's egregious, luxuriously self-indulgent self-pity.¹³

Perhaps it is "indulgent self pity" when Lyman indulges his grandmother in this fashion:

Should I take an interest in you even if you were historical, white, a woman, and my grandmother? Did all your talents, and Grandfather's, and all the efforts of a long strenuous life go for no more than to produce Rodman and me, a sociologist and a cripple? Nothing in your life or art to teach a modern or one-legged man something?
(p. 23)

Or when he confronts his wife toward the novel's end:

I cried at her silently, you dare to come here and sit on my porch and drive away my friends! You dare to sit there as if you were welcome, or had a right? Do you remember at all what you did to me? Have you no shame? What do you want here? What have I got left that you'd like to take from me?
(p. 549)

¹² Glendy Culligan, Review of Angle of Repose, Saturday Review, 20 March 1971, p. 34.

¹³ Edward Twining, "Hung up on Virtue and Talent," The Univ. of Denver Quarterly, 6 (Winter 1972), 111.

It is true that at their maudlin worst, Joe and Lyman are too anxious to jump into their readers' laps and, in this respect, violate propriety. But then most readers will probably make allowances for these occasional indiscretions that become absorbed by the narrators' larger sense of humanity and by their refreshing brand of wit and humor. These seem to constitute the narrators' primary character assets as set against a significant liability--sentimentality.

As part of the conceived formula, then, the first-person-as-major character feature places a considerable burden on the personality or character of the narrators. Also, the manner in which Joe and Lyman fulfill the other part of the prescription as self-conscious and reliable narrators carries additional consequences for the success of the novel. The manner in which Lyman sets about discussing his writing chores, for instance, will no doubt draw mixed reactions. While this feature is one of the novelties of Angle of Repose, it can prove a liability as well as an asset. Some readers will find it interesting to see a work in process, to learn how the writer operates:

On the long desk my grandparents' lives are spread out in files and folders, not as orderly as I would like them, and not as fully understood, but waiting with a look of welcome. The loose folders I have been working on are weighted down with grandfather's rock samples. (p. 31)

or

So long as I have quoted Augusta on Susan, I may as well quote Susan on Augusta. This is from her unpublished reminiscences (p. 32)

Others, though, might prefer to explore the house of fiction on their own. They would as soon not carry the narrator on their shoulders--but let him remain at the door holding their coats. Nor do they necessarily want to move into the house before it is built:

What would Susan Ward and Frank Sargent have said to each other in the two hours before Oliver and Ollie returned to town? Having brought them together, I find it difficult to put words in their mouths.
(p. 449)

Another by-product of Ward's self-consciousness is the rhetorical question which might prove irritating:

Why then am I spending all this effort trying to understand my grandparents' lives? What am I talking and organizing all this for? Why do I hire this girl to make my talking real by typing it off the papers? (p. 439)

In addition, Joe and Lyman as reliable narrators invite plenty of reaction with their love of the polemic. For him whose political instinct is that of the old-fashioned liberal, Joe and Lyman are most welcome and appropriate inventions for the sixties--that time when all the hobgoblins of irrationality were unleashed upon society. These two characters are usually plugging for the past in one way or the other, for the past values of our literary, cultural, and historical heritage. They are the defenders of sanity who bring the hard light of reason to bear upon the age; they are effective counterforces to the ignorance and arrogance of the "card carrying members of the liberated generation"--the Shelley Rassmussens and the Jim Pecks. Notice the

reaction when Shelley presents Lyman with The Berkeley Ecology Center's Manifesto:

I'm put off by long hair, I'm put off by Whitman. I can't help remembering that good old wild Thoreau wound up a tame surveyor of Concord lots . . . the civilization he was contemptuous of--that civilization of men who lived lives of quiet desperation--was stronger than he was, and maybe righter. (p. 514)

Joe takes a similar stance toward Jim Peck, the unwelcome hippy squatter who encroaches upon Allston's property and his peace of mind:

But I thought of all the gibberish I would have to listen to, all the dyspeptic mixture of unmixables that it would be my duty to try to digest. There would be all the self-realization business, which was itself a mongrel cross between Socrates on the examined life and the Buddha on contemplation. There would be all those far-out states that Peck thought he could reach by diet, by Yoga, by fasting, by drugs, and that would begin in Huxley's Doors of Perception and end in Leary's LSD cult. There would be a lot of Zen passivism scrambled with a sanyasi withdrawal, and mixed with both a portion of existential disgust. Though there didn't seem to be much civil rights militancy in Peck, I was sure he would have a full share of inert sympathy with civil rights principles and a full share of contempt for the people who, trying harder than he to solve something, were not succeeding. There would likewise be at least a noise of sympathy with all the other activists, the sitters-in, the teachers-in, and the singers-in, against authority of whatever degree of repressiveness or responsibility.

(Little Live Things, p. 108)

Joe here is referring to "that great underdone pizza of a Jim Peck's faith"--his "theosophy-and-water, two candle-power illuminations." Peck has "too much Dean in his

Ginsberg" and, like Shelley, is not much of a match for the literary guns of a Joe Allston or a Lyman Ward. One might reasonably fault this lack of intellectual balance in the first person narrator novels in that no one is really a match for the narrator. Consequently, the novels seem rigged in the narrators' favor. Even though Joe is infatuated with Marian Catlin in Little Live Things, for instance, she is presented as little more than a pleasing platitude. Only in A Shooting Star does one find some balance in the Sabrina-Leonard exchanges. Sabrina's sardonic wit carries the Joe Allston--Lyman Ward trademark. About her husband she remarks cynically, "I've been around for twelve years like a mountain he was determined to climb; he needed to plant a flag on my top for some reason."¹⁴ Her sparring partner, Leonard McDonald, on the other hand, sparks his wit with literary allusion. When Sabrina asks "how are my girls?" his reply is:

"your girls are too much
with us late and soon." (p. 226)

"A quotation for every occasion," observes Sabrina a bit later.

"Break, break, break," Leonard said,
a little annoyed.

"Do you memorize all these little phrases,
or do they just stick to you?" [asks Sabrina]

"you've heard of the human fly. I'm the
human fly paper." (p. 363)

¹⁴ Wallace Stegner, A Shooting Star (New York: Viking, 1961), p. 239.

But though Sabrina is a fair match for Leonard, his cuteness weakens the impact of the exchanges. The difference between his mannered wit and the red-necked intellectualism of Joe and Lyman is the difference between talcum and gun powder. One need only compare the above with Lyman's bombast on sociologists:

"God, those sociologists! They're always trying to reclaim a tropical jungle with a sprinkling can full of weed killer. Civilizations grow and change and decline--they aren't remade." (p. 519)

Perhaps, though, it is this kind of social/political commentary together with the alleged sentimentality that has provoked critics such as Twining to "call on the author to drop his transparent mask, and call him to account for a curious self-dramatization which shatters the barrier of artistic distance."¹⁵ It is this kind of commentary on the part of both narrators that raises the question: to what degree do Joe and Lyman serve as Stegner's spokesmen or reliable narrators? Since the question has sparked some sharp differences in critical opinion, the argument will be briefly examined here.

On the one hand, critic Twining goes so far as to refer to Lyman as "Ward/Stegner," and Sid Jensen seems assured that both Lyman and Joe do indeed speak for Stegner. In fact, Jensen claims that "Stegner writes best when using

¹⁵ Twining, p. 111.

his own voice or something close to it":

However much Stegner's personal voice weakens historical objectivity, however much his voice destroys the dramatic illusion in a novel, this is precisely Wallace Stegner's strength. If one could deny him his own voice, he would destroy Stegner's ability (as blind Gloucester says to Lear on the heath) to make us "see feelingly."¹⁶

But other critics react with annoyance to the notion that Stegner can be identified with his narrators--what Kerry Ahern considers a common pitfall of Stegner criticism.¹⁷ And Audrey Peterson claims that it is

essential not to confuse Ward with Stegner. As Robert Canzoneri observes in speaking of All The Little Live Things, we must not think Stegner "so naive as to speak in his own voice while operating Joe Allston's mouth like that of a puppet" (p. 823). Lyman Ward's views may often coincide with those of Stegner; in this sense he is what Wayne Booth calls a "reliable narrator," because his norms are in accord with those of the implied author. But the reader is clearly intended to see Ward as a dramatized character, subject to human frailty.¹⁸

The argument here, of course, is limited by its conjectural nature, for the test of reliability is in itself

¹⁶ Sid Jensen, "The Middle Ground: A Study of Wallace Stegner's Use of History in Fiction," Diss. Univ. of Utah, 1972, p. 45.

¹⁷ Kerry Ahern, "The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Angle of Repose: Trial and Culmination," Western American Literature, 10 (May 1975), 13.

¹⁸ Audrey Peterson, "The Narrative Voice in Wallace Stegner's Angle of Repose," Western American Literature, 10 (August 1975), 127.

arbitrary. It depends on the qualified reader's ability to detect via tone the author speaking through his narrators. It is a matter of degree, then, and a matter of terms. If one uses Booth's definition, reliability would depend on whether or not the reader thought that the narrator's norms represented for the most part those of the "implied author." Terms such as "author," "author's voice," and "implied author" are in need of definition if the above differences are to be reconciled. For Booth the implied author is that "superior version of himself" that the real author gets from the writing process:

To some novelists it has seemed, indeed, that they were discovering or creating themselves as they wrote. As Jessamyn West says, it is sometimes "only by writing the story that the novelist can discover--not his story--but its writer, the official scribe, so to speak," or adapt the term recently revived by Kathleen Tillotson--the author's "second self"--it is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author's most important effects.¹⁹

Though Twining and Jensen do not make such distinctions and are a bit reckless in appearing to equate the real life Stegner with his narrators, they are quite right in believing that a good deal of the author's sensibility participates in the social, political, and aesthetic commentary of Lyman and Joe--regardless of the terms they use. And it is the contention of this writer that these important intellectual norms of the implied author and narrators--the social, political,

¹⁹ Booth, p. 71.

and aesthetic--coincide often enough to make Joe and Lyman "reliable" according to Booth's definition, a definition which also makes allowances for "incidental" or "difficult irony."²⁰

It is true that for the purpose of humor and dramatic irony, Stegner has, with Lyman and Joe, hoisted more cantankerous versions of himself into the wind so that the reader can watch them play tricks on themselves, especially in their personal and domestic relationships. In each work the reader finds them undergoing a mellowing process--a change that affects their intellectual norms little, however. In Field Guide Joe Allston's dislike for the pianist Kaminski is softened, transformed into wonder and concern because "they [the Gods] don't give you enough time in a single life time to figure anything out" (p. 194). In Little Live Things Joe's condescension towards Marian's simple philosophy of life is undercut by his realization that she has "invaded" him: "though my mind may not have changed, I will not be the same" (p. 8). At the end of Angle of Repose, Lyman, after stubbornly resisting his wife's gestures toward reconciliation, wonders whether he is man enough to be "bigger than my grandfather" as he contemplates forgiveness (p. 569). And in The Spectator Bird the reader watches Joe squirm under his wife's scrutiny as the content of his diary is revealed. One of the incidents exposed is Joe's past

²⁰ Booth, p. 159.

affair with the Danish countess, but in the process Joe is purged of guilt feelings, and his anxiety is transformed into peace of mind.

But readers should sense that the distance between author or implied author and his narrators is not great in the previously cited narrator commentary on aging, home and habit, sociologists, and the counter-culture. One feels that author and narrator are especially close in this kind of comment on civilization from Little Live Things:

The whole history of mankind is social, not individual. We've learned little by little to turn human energy into social order. Outside the establishment these kids despise so much, an individual doesn't exist, he hasn't got any language, character, art, ideas, anything, that didn't come to him from society. (p. 164)

In fact, this last pronouncement comprises a theme that Joe Hairston has traced throughout Stegner's work in his dissertation entitled, "The Westerner's Dilemma."²¹ It is the theme of "community," man's need for civilization. One hears it again when Lyman claims that "civilizations grow by agreements and accommodations and accretions, not by repudiations" (p. 519).

But though the critics may differ on this matter of reliability, they are, for the most part, in agreement as to the uniqueness of Stegner's recent narrator devices, especially in Angle of Repose. Audrey Peterson, for instance,

²¹ Joe Hairston, "The Westerner's Dilemma," Diss. Univ. of Minnesota, 1971.

claims that in Angle of Repose Stegner scores a triumph while appearing to break all the rules; and those rules, as they exist in modern literature, favor "showing" or the objective method rather than the "telling" or rhetorical mode. They would consider an "intruding" narrator such as Lyman or Joe an "impurity" or at least an anachronism. Ms. Peterson notes that

. . . ever since theorists codified James' remarks into rules for fiction, it has been not only unfashionable but almost unthinkable for the teller of a tale to "intrude" upon the narrative to make comments. Earlier novelists from Defoe to Hardy have been scored for such inartistic practices and then forgiven on the ground of living before the enlightenment.²²

But though Stegner might be incorrigibly unfaddish, he is not an anachronism either; for while he characteristically asserts his independence in the face of the prevailing literary fashion by bringing back the intruding narrator, he is at the same time fresh and experimental in his adaption of eighteenth century narrative devices to contemporary material.

For instance, Angle of Repose offers an ambitious and complex format that presents two stories operating in parallel--the past story of Lyman's grandparents told in the third person omniscient and the present story of Lyman's domestic conflicts rendered in the first person. It presents at once the old and the new West, a history and a novel. It also places a greater burden on the narrator than do the

²² Peterson, p. 125.

other California novels, for he must be the unifying agent for the two stories, the spokesman for the author on political and artistic matters, and the manipulator host who shows the reader how the artist and the historian go about their work. The method here allows Stegner to demonstrate his skills as both historian and novelist while commenting on the problems of both, to confront contemporary political and social issues more directly and explicitly, and to present a narrator who, though reliable, is dramatized in the interest of humor and irony. It is, as Ms. Peterson claims, a method both older than Fielding and newer than Nabokov. But rather than employing an "editor" who is satisfied to remain in the first person of the present plot while letting a third person omniscient narrator speak for the past, Stegner has his narrator Ward dancing across both plots, notes Ms. Peterson:

. . . blithely moving from the first to third person, interrupting his own omniscient narrator with pungent comments and even discussing his own role in "creating" scenes in the novel, yet all the while holding the reader so firmly in his spell that his machinations are largely unobserved.²³

While Lyman's "self consciousness" hardly goes unobserved, it does help bridge the gap between the past and the present and raise the curtain on the writer at work. Hence, the sense of immediacy and realism that helps pay for the loss of concreteness and increased abstraction of the

²³ Peterson, p. 125.

polemical/rhetorical parts of the novel. The result is a fiction that seems determined to prevent the reader's disbelief. For example, Lyman Ward is anxious to dispel any mystery about the writer at work--historian or writer of fiction:

A historian scans a thousand documents to find one fact that he can use. If he is working with correspondence, as I am, and with the correspondence of a woman to boot, he will wade toward his little island of information through a dismal swamp of recipes, housekeeping details, children's diseases, insignificant visitors, inconclusive conversations with people unknown to the historian, and recitations of what the writer did yesterday. (p. 397)

Or when it becomes necessary to supplement fact with "fiction," Lyman lets the reader in on it:

What went on on that piazza? I don't know. I don't even know they were there, I just made up the scene to fit other facts that I do know. (p. 508)

In this way then, Stegner attempts to overcome some of the problems that naturally accompany an intrusive and loquacious narrator. Robert Canzoneri affirms the success of the narrator device, here, finding it "a far more interesting study of the nature of art and its relation to reality, as well as a far more convincing and visceral experience, than I do Nabokov's gamemanship on the theme."²⁴ It is also the trick that makes the triumph, according to Kerry Ahern, who claims that Stegner's narrative method in Angle of Repose

²⁴ Robert Canzoneri, "Wallace Stegner: Trial by Existence," The Southern Review, 9, No. 4 (Autumn 1973), 796.

not only solved his early technical problems but makes this novel superior to The Big Rock Candy Mountain.

However, it is the contention of this writer that a technical superiority of the one does not in itself make it a superior novel. In addition, The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Angle of Repose are different kinds of novels that cannot rightfully be compared. What works well for one is not necessarily the proper method for the other. The charge against Big Rock Candy Mountain is that it suffers from a lack of unity and detachment or too much intimacy of material in which Stegner stacks the cards against the father, Bo Mason, who is a thin disguise for Stegner's real life father:

. . . there should be either a third-person-limited telling which really sees as each consciousness leads, or a first person rendering, Bruce's. The broad scope of the novel demands the former, and its preoccupation with Bruce's search for identity theme the latter. More control in fusing the two might have resulted in a narrative stance similar to Wolfe's in Look Homeward, Angel (some later sections of Stegner's novel have precisely that tone); perhaps the very possibility prompted him to try another technique.²⁵

Perhaps it did, but meanwhile it is not clear how the first person narrative device in Angle of Repose necessarily cures the excessive intimacy that Stegner supposedly visits on The Big Rock Candy Mountain. Actually, the chosen method for each works quite well and suggests the polarities represented by the two novels, which present the best of his early and recent fiction, respectively.

²⁵ Ahern, p. 15.

The Big Rock Candy Mountain features shifting, omniscient narrators who practice "interior realism" on different members of the Mason family. Much of this impressionism is rendered in the second person which gives the book a quaint charm and intimacy of its own, quite appropriate to a rough, warm, and expansive novel that by its personal and familial nature allows for more feeling. For example, one might witness Elsa's thought stream:

You remembered how the future
looked on that trip west, close
and touchable and warm as it
had been only once before in the
early weeks of your marriage.²⁶

Another oddly, effective device is to have an "arguer" as conscience or alter ego to oppose ego. This occurs when Bo Mason, in the beginning of Part II, searches his soul, wrestling with the guilt that plagues him after his brutality to his son, Bruce--the event that caused Elsa and her two sons to leave him:

How could I go back in a week with
my tail between my legs?

You could have written a letter, the
arguer said. (p. 139)

The complex nature of Angle of Repose, however, with its contemporary setting, California in the sixties, takes a more complex apparatus in the roving narrator, Ward. There is here a greater need for unity and detachment, but the value of these qualities should change with the material.

²⁶Wallace Stegner, The Big Rock Candy Mountain (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 78. Hereafter referred to as Rock Candy Mountain.

Otherwise, they are but cloistered virtues. Ahern's claim that Angle of Repose is a "descendent of and improvement on The Big Rock Candy Mountain" assumes a similarity of material. While it is true that Angle of Repose "contains all the significant themes of The Big Rock Candy Mountain,"²⁷ its added contemporary frame plot plus a shift of emphasis in the Ward plot make it a quite different kind of novel. The differences here are primarily of kind, not degree. Granted, the Ward story, the core of Angle of Repose, is a western epic which resembles that "broad scope" of Rock Candy Mountain, featuring awesome individuals pitted against frontier realities. The falseness of the western success myth and the consequence of succumbing to it is certainly a broad theme in both works. It is a much less emphatic one in Angle of Repose, however, where Lyman seems less interested in rugged individualism than in those "unlike particles," the Wards, whose inexplicable loyalty and integrity hold lessons for Lyman's own domestic life as well as for the younger generations in the sixties. These are the central interests in Angle of Repose and they account for the two different stories working in counterpoint--Lyman's and that of his grandparents.

In fact, Ward's fascination with the mysterious ambiguities of his grandparents is the dominating topic of the book, one that reveals its kinship with the other California novels. For here, too, Lyman is left at the novel's end pondering the dark mysteries of the human heart. The

²⁷ Ahern, pp. 13 and 21.

suggestion of the perplexed bird contemplating the vagaries of himself and his fellow birds is the prevailing metaphor in Stegner's recent fiction. Actually, one finds re-emerging bird symbolism throughout his works, while two of his short stories, one novella, and his latest novel carry birds in their titles--"The Butcher Bird," "The Blue Winged Teal," Field Guide to the Western Birds, and The Spectator Bird.

In his first novel, for instance, a young woman rescues a young quail chick that her brother-in-law, in clumsy fun, had separated from its mother. This incident occurs during the incipient romance between these two, Elpeseth and Alec, husband of Elpeseth's sister. Elpeseth takes the quail chick home and the quail, an outsider like Elpeseth herself, spends its days among the chickens. In their subsequent, furtive contacts, Elpeseth and Alec meet at the chicken pen, a structure which becomes increasingly symbolic. Also, the quail becomes an obvious symbol for Elpeseth. Innocent and helpless, it is pursued, captured, and finally relegated to a home among alien birds, and though it adjusts, it is never really accepted by the hens. Interestingly enough, Elpeseth loses interest in her pet quail when it becomes domesticated, just as Alec eventually gives up on Elpeseth after she has his baby and becomes tame, resigning herself to life with the Stuarts (Alec and wife) in spite of the incurable wounds to pride, trust, and honor inflicted on all parties.

Much later, the quail turns up again as a similar kind of symbol in A Shooting Star. As Sabrina ponders her

unsatisfactory affair with Bernard and her unhappy marriage to Burke, a pair of quail appear as if in "a paradigm of conjugality" (p. 116). The female quail, like the quail in Remembering Laughter, is submissive and hen pecked.

Another kind, the Butcher Bird in the short story, "The Butcher Bird," fashioned from an episode in Rock Candy Mountain, is one which kills indiscriminately and wantonly and becomes a symbol for adults who do likewise. Also, the wings of the Blue Winged Teal in the story by that name become a symbol for the dead mother. Both father and estranged son recognize in the fragile and delicate wings tacked on the frame of a back-bar mirror, aesthetic beauty and the superior sensibility of the mother. Through this symbol, father and son share a rare moment of understanding and recognition.

Other birds--magpies, sparrows, and linnets--flit randomly through the pages of Stegner's fiction, but not until Field Guide do they all come to roost in Joe Allston's back yard--woodpeckers, nuthatches, warblers, quail, finches, and "some kind of towhee" (p. 127). It is here that the bird becomes established as the primary metaphor for perplexed and inscrutable man.

But the attention here is on the towhee. At the work's beginning, Joe can not find this "some kind of towhee" in the bird book, for like man, the bird remains inscrutable to others and to himself. He keeps challenging his reflection in the mirror, repeatedly thumping against the glass, and Joe

cannot help but admire him for his pugnacity:

For about ten days now he has been
struggling with himself like Jacob
with his angel, Hercules with his
Hydra, Christian with his conscience,
old retired Joe Allston with his
memoirs. (p. 127)

In identifying with the towhee, Joe is reminded of that eternal struggle with the angel, Art, whose media are glass and light. In building his study, he strives for privacy, quiet, and withdrawal but makes the "whole north wall of glass, for light, and that was where I got caught." He is caught and distracted by the infinite variety of birds that keeps him from his memoirs.

Perhaps, though, this turning toward the outside, toward the light and the greater variety of humanity has additional significance. One cannot help but see the parallels forming here between Stegner, the artist, and his Joe Allston creation in the opening pages of Field Guide published at mid-career in 1956. It is at this point that Stegner assumes a new fictional method, a new lens on life, with the adoption of the narrator device, contemporary California as setting, and the more visible use of the bird motif.

Whether or not his newer method is necessarily better than his older omniscient method in promoting clarity and the honestly offered spirit of the artist, however, is still questionable. Certainly it serves his purpose well; and that purpose remains consistent with his life-long artistic creed of clarity, to tell it straight whether by telling or showing.

Neither has a monopoly on clarity. There are, nevertheless, risks in "breaking the rules." And Stegner has with his narrators violated one of the rules by choosing to indulge in the joys of rhetoric. Perhaps rhetoric is better suited to the honest mind than to the honest heart. It is this writer's feeling that the search for the honest soul suffers some from the rhetoric even though the rhetoric is most enjoyable. On the other hand, one must remember that the rhetoric of debate was an appropriate instrument in the sixties for restoring reason and clarifying issues. Besides, Mr. Booth claims that "an author cannot choose to avoid rhetoric; he can choose only the kind of rhetoric he will employ." And after all,

if the most admired literature is in fact radically contaminated with rhetoric, we must surely be led to ask whether the rhetoric itself may not have had something to do with our admiration.²⁸

Perhaps, then, one should surrender to the rhetoric which includes the wit and humanity of those fellow travelers, Lyman and Joe. Their struggle is our struggle. Like the towhee, theirs is a struggle to find themselves, to find the light and the human heart. The closing lines of Stegner's latest novel claim that

the truest vision of life I know is that bird in the Venerable Bede that flutters from the dark into a lighted hall and after a while flutters out again into the dark. (p. 213)

²⁸ Booth, p. 98.

And thus we leave Joe a different kind of bird but still struggling with the light, though somewhat reconciled to the vagaries of truth. That may well be what the artist must settle for--light followed by darkness. What is important, however, is to know that he has struggled.

PART II

THEME: FATHERS AND SONS

. . . I was born a rolling stone.
I have always thought of myself as
a sort of social and literary air
plant, without the sustaining roots
that luckier people have.²⁹

Like much contemporary fiction, Stegner's works reflect a search for personal identity. However, this theme is made more emphatic through the paternalistic patterns of his fiction--the dominant pattern which usually features the protagonist's search for and/or relationship to a father authority figure. These relationships are usually expressed in a variety of forms--filial, political, or spiritual, and sometimes in combination. Of the various filial patterns, the father and son relationships in Rock Candy Mountain and the Joe Allston novels are most significant.

The broadly paternalistic theme of Stegner's fiction is probably a natural consequence of and reaction to his own childhood which produced at once a sense of rootlessness and the complicated love/hate attitude toward the father (insofar as one can assume the close parallels between the fictional Mason family and Stegner's own which seem to be confirmed in Wolf Willow). This latter--the relationship to the father--is the overpowering influence in Rock Candy Mountain and the other Bruce Mason stories, the most

²⁹ Stegner, The Sound of Mountain Water, p. 158.

significant and powerful of Stegner's first and second phase fiction, and the influence that informs all of his works.

The effect of rootlessness, then, plus an apparently traumatic childhood have made Stegner especially conscious of place, of home, and the human need for recognition, approval, belonging, and love. These are the universals that involve men in their individual Odysseys, those quests that have contradictory thrusts--to and away from home, the need for fulfillment on the one hand and the need for roots and security on the other. Personal fulfillment for the intelligent and the sensitive requires that they cut the apron strings and take advantage of education, opportunity, travel, and contact with others. On the other hand, one always seeks unconsciously to return, to re-claim those moments of parental love and approval, however rare those moments might actually have been, however hateful a parent might have been in reality. The importance of that approval becomes enlarged in the psyche, the approval unconsciously sought from others who later on in life become father/authority substitutes in the conscience. But always behind these figures lie the ghostly echoes of childhood, the voices of the parents. All writing is a revenge on childhood, it is said, with the author seeking to reestablish himself in the home of his soul.

Such are the forces that produce the warm humanity and the passionate "parenthood" of Stegner's fiction. The varieties of parenthood range from the filial to the non-filial, from fathers and sons to mothers and daughters, mothers and

sons, and fathers and daughters. Those most important are often the products of triangles, the basic structure of his fiction.

In Stegner's first novel, Remembering Laughter, the son Malcolm is a product of an illicit triangle made up of Alec McLeod, wife Margaret, and Margaret's younger sister, Elpeseth, who comes from Scotland to stay at the McLeods' farm in Iowa. But after her arrival, Alec's original and genuinely paternalistic feelings toward her become complicated by lust. In time Elpeseth bears his son whom they name Malcolm, while Margaret succeeds in reducing the magnitude of the scandal by sending off a hired hand, making him appear to be the guilty party on the lam. But from that point on, the three of them--Margaret, Elpeseth, and Alec--live together in icy estrangement, and Malcolm is raised in the shadow of the black secret, in an "atmosphere of loveless frigidity nurtured by wrong and fattened by silence. . . ."30

Margaret resigns herself to a sadistic martyrdom, and Alec finds relief from the oppressive atmosphere of the house by devoting a genuine and hearty paternalism to Malcolm. He teaches Malcolm to laugh. Malcolm's innocent joy invades the house like sunlight, but is not enough to melt away the gloom. After Alec dies of a heart attack and Malcolm guesses the secret of his parenthood, he goes away, leaving his

30 Wallace Stegner, Remembering Laughter (Boston: Little Brown, 1937), p. 78.

"aunts" forever enemies yoked in a joyless house. One might view Alec as the innocent culprit in all this who after corrupting Elpeseth, visits revenge upon his frigid household by "corrupting" Malcolm in joy and laughter.

Another illicit triangle develops in The Potter's House, Stegner's next novel. The potter and his family are deaf mutes. The potter's brother, a businessman who grudgingly aids the family, exercises a patronizing and malevolent paternalism toward the potter, insisting on his sterilization as a safeguard against more deaf children. As a consequence, wife Annie leaves the potter for a disreputable mute, Harrigan, in silent protest against the operation.

On a Darkling Plain is the first of Stegner's novels indicating his polemical instinct that is evident in all his subsequent novels and is an especially prominent feature in Fire and Ice, The Preacher and the Slave, A Shooting Star, All the Little Live Things, and Angle of Repose. In On a Darkling Plain there are two kinds of paternalism, the more visible of which is expressed in the developing love between Vickers and Ina, the young teen-age daughter of a Saskatchewan frontiersman, Abel Sunstrom. Vickers, who comes to Saskatchewan to simplify his life, finds in Ina the beginning complications that will eventually force him back into civilization and to a reconciliation with that "bitch, humanity." What promises to be a perfectly balanced love, combining at once a protective, fatherly concern with intellectual and sexual compatibility, is first threatened and then destroyed

by the disastrous flu epidemic of 1918. The attraction to Ina is disconcerting enough to one pledged to a hermit's life of isolation and meditation, but worse, the indiscriminate flu bug infects her family, and eventually all, including Vickers, are forced into town for the only medical help available. Ina dies and Vickers finds himself deeply drawn into civilization. The Vickers-Ina relationship is, of course, only incidental to the philosophical center of the book, which is the debate between the proponents of the Thoreauvian life of withdrawal to the wilderness and those of a life of community involvement. The two sides of the debate are heard indirectly via Vickers' meditations or monologues and his letters home. The debate becomes more explicit toward the end in the brief encounters between Vickers and the town physician, Dr. O'Malley, who presents the first hint of Stegner's moderate-to-conservative political views surfacing in his fiction. O'Malley appears to be the normative, reliable vehicle for these views. He is a model of warmth and tolerance toward the sick and a man of action whose deeds, more than his words, best illustrate the principle of compassionate involvement in community. And it is what he does, not so much what he says, that sets the example for Vickers and draws him out of his despair over the death of Ina. Nevertheless, both his words and deeds provide a moderating, paternal influence on Vickers, who learns that he cannot just kill time without injuring eternity and that adversity has some sweet uses. At novel's end, Vickers is reconciled to humanity, finding

that "in the comradeship of ruin there was a tempering of the spirit"; and that "the resiliency of humanity under the whip was justification for all its meannesses."³¹

Of these more polemical novels, Fire and Ice and The Preacher and the Slave are the two most explicitly "political." Both deal with narrow and self-limiting leftward political philosophies. Of the two, The Preacher and the Slave is the better novel, for it dramatizes through fiction the particular history of Joe Hill within the larger movement of the I.W.W. and offers a courtroom documentary of the guilt and/or innocence of the controversial folk hero, Joe Hill. Fire and Ice, on the other hand, is slim in substance and one of Stegner's least polished works. But both novels feature father figures who try to moderate the radical excesses of their "sons." And both works carry Stegner's implicit disapproval of political systems that operate from absolutes and extremes. The preacher, Lund, in The Preacher and the Slave represents a compassionate rationalism similar to that of Dr. O'Malley in On A Darkling Plain. Although he is unable to do much with Joe and Joe does not agree with him, Lund does represent Joe's one dependable source of honesty and loyal friendship. He is also an intellectual sounding-board for Joe's shrill and muddled political philosophy. It is through the mind of Lund that the reader infers Stegner's assessment of Joe Hill:

He was disappointed in Joe. The power to discriminate was no longer there; the

³¹ Wallace Stegner, On A Darkling Plain (New York: Harcourt, 1940), p. 230.

hard, uncompromising arrogance of the self-righteous was in his voice and in the sterile doctrines he preached.³²

While Lund hopes that his own faith had led him to scepticism and humanitarianism, he feels that Joe's has led him to "crusades, blood-letting and head-knocking in lofty cause" (p. 186) And he concludes that

a partisan is no man anymore; he is a man whittled to a sharp point, every humane quality in him, all his compassion and talent and intelligence and common sense and sense of justice pared away in the interest of striking power. (p. 187)

Although these are ostensibly the thoughts of the fictional preacher Lund, they are consistent with Stegner's remarks in the forward to the novel:

The I.W.W. was a fighting faith. Its members were the shock troops of labor. Its weakness was that it really liked a fight better than it liked planning, negotiations, politicking. (p. ix)

Nevertheless, the novel's tone reveals a controlled admiration for the imaginative but ambiguous character of Joe Hill--though Stegner reminds readers that the Joe Hill in this work is an "act of the imagination" (p. x).

Fire and Ice features a student communist, Paul Condon, who is given to taking the party dogma into his own hands. But he learns that the communists do not condone dogmatic acts of violence, however dogmatic their principles might be. He receives a visit from one of the party patriarchs, Willem Trapp, who proceeds to lecture him on his

³² Wallace Stegner, The Preacher and the Slave (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), p. 186.

indiscretions and to remind him that the party "is bigger than any man in it."³³ But Trapp represents moderation in the service of questionable cause, small moderation now as an expedient to large violence later. It is perverted paternalism at best and Paul comes to reject it at the novel's end. Paul, who at the beginning of the novel is full of arrogant violence and hatred for the capitalist "college snotties," is at its end repentant, peaceful, and full of self-effacing self assessment. He realizes that his clumsy attempt to rape the queen of the "capitalist sows," Miriam Hadley, was in fact his wish to rape the whole capitalist system, not because he hated it but because he envied and wanted "to possess it, not tear it down." So it was jealousy all along and Paul realizes that he was just a "mean little garden variety green-eyed monster" (p. 199). He says of the party:

I'm suspicious of it. It's too
easy when you got that kind of faith
to do one thing and make yourself
believe that you're doing another. (p. 212)

Paul's remarkable turnabout is not completely convincing. The transition from truculence to reasonableness and moderation is too abrupt, forced, and artificial. At this point, the reader feels that Paul has, indeed, been transformed into a puppet for the author's views on the matter.

Second Growth is another of Stegner's slighter works, a novel with three plots, each featuring a pair in which one

³³ Wallace Stegner, Fire and Ice (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), p. 129.

party exercises a paternalism toward the other. These plots operate mostly independent of each other, having as their common center the little New Hampshire village of Westwick.

Two single girls, secretary Flo Burns and school teacher Helen Barlow, comprise one pair. Flo's ostensible interest in and counseling of Helen is corrupted by the former's lesbian lust; as a consequence, Helen commits suicide rather than submit to the tyranny of Flo who has, for one thing, gotten Helen in the habit of nude swims in the nearby lake.

Jewish Abe Kaplan and Ruth Liebowitz bring to the novel an ethnic component. Abe, by Ruth's own account, is the "grizzled, middle-aged man, a gentle, impetuous kind man, but a stranger."³⁴ She marries him, nevertheless. He had taken the much younger Ruth, though a bird of the same ethnic feather, under his fatherly wing when she had come to visit a friend in the village. Until that time, Abe had been the Jewish Thoreau of the village, a refugee from first Russia and then Boston, where he had contracted consumption. Though lonely, he adapts to the village, taking its prejudices in his stride. But Ruth, after moving from New York City into Abe's tent, takes to her bed, convinced that the town is against her. But the evidence is slim and the reader comes to believe that the real cause is more probably a combination of her homesickness for the culture of New York and second thoughts about her marriage.

³⁴ Wallace Stegner, Second Growth (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), p. 92.

The third pair of protagonists consists of the ideal relationship between Peter Dow, distinguished professor of history, and Andy Mount, precocious orphan resigned to menial tasks in the village. Stegner takes pains to make the distinguished professor divinely common, a man who amazes Andy by talking "just like anybody" and working like a horse. Loveable old Peter Dow works his gentle commonness and paternalism on Andy, "corrupting" him out of his timidity and awakening in him desire for education and opportunity at places like Princeton.

This is Stegner's one novel that is supposed to say something about the village, although it has little chance of saying much new in 1947, long after writers of the twenties such as Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson had pretty much exhausted the subject. In a separate prefatory sheet of the novel, Stegner provides "a note on fictional character" in which he claims that Westwick was conceived as a kind of mythical village with such people "as this village seems to me likely to contain," while the village itself is to own a certain universality:

The cultural dynamism, the conflicts on the frontier between two ways of life, which is its central situation, is one that has been reproduced in an endlessly changing pattern all over the U.S. It should be if I have been successful, as visible in Carmel-by-the-sea or Taos or Charlevoix as on the fictionless Ammosaukee River. These people and their village took form in my mind not as portraits, but as symbols. There are no portraits, personal

or geographical, in the novel. (A separate sheet without page number)

Part of the problem is that the central situation, the conflict between the two ways of life, is not sharply drawn. Whatever Stegner wants to say about it is enfeebled because the three duos that make up the three plots set in the Northeast are not the best devices to say something about a simplified "two ways of life," whatever that is--frontier agrarianism versus eastern urbanity, perhaps. Flo's and Helen's lesbianism is a private thing while Abe and Ruth see little of the native villagers and are given a bit to intellectual snobbery; the Peter Dow-Andy Mount relationship, alone, would have a better chance of illuminating the central conflict. But as it is, the town's cultural patterns are scrambled and temporary, the outside tourists pouring in and out with the seasons so that Westwick does not make the best case study. The three paternal duos get absorbed in themselves; the three plot lines seem to be working toward a common center a notch at a time but never quite make it. They go their own separate ways at the novel's end, barely touching one another.

Another part of the problem is that Stegner succeeded all too well in making symbols out of the characters. They are not convincing. Besides that, the tone of the novel seems disturbingly rigged in favor of the tourist intellectuals who demonstrate "invincible good nature" with their "antiquarian interest" in village dances, for instance.

These summer folk crash clumsily about the floor, "tangling up the sets beyond anyone's untangling" and irritating the village people "half way to homicide." They seem bent on forcing their antiquarian notions on the villagers and sore annoyed are they when the villagers want something besides polkas or square dances. "When they succeeded, the rest of the village cleared the floor. It wasn't safe to stay" (p. 4). The reader, no doubt, is in sympathy with the villager at this point because good humored or not, the tourists' paternalism for the country bumpkins of Westwick is patronizing.

Nevertheless, if Second Growth is a slight work, so are all of Stegner's early works when compared to The Big Rock Candy Mountain. Rock Candy Mountain is certainly the best of his early novels and may prove to be his best over all. Like much fiction, it is thinly disguised autobiography, one of its strengths in this case. The basic filial structure consists of an oedipal triangle of the father at one point, the mother at another, and the sons at the third. Bruce obviously represents the young Stegner, and of course, the Bo Mason- Bruce father and son relationship is the most significant one. As for the literary precedents, Sid Jensen, besides noticing the Vardis Fisher influence on the book, also sees the Faulkner influence and compares it to Absalom, Absalom!, drawing parallels between the father-son relationships of Sutpen-Charles Bon and Bo-Bruce. Bruce is also like Quentin Compson in his attempt to "search his

family history to understand himself."³⁵ The resemblance, though superficial, is valid enough, but Bruce does not have the complicated layers of geneology to untangle that Quentin does and his is not so much a search as an analysis. Nor does the soul of Bo present the many facets of subterranean subtlety of Thomas Sutpen. Bo inherits the Westerner's impulsive urge to act before thinking and his schemes are, for the most part, pathetically naïvé. He is also a Westerner or a Northwesterner and a fictional and regional original; and his story, set against a panoramic western vista, is fresh and unique. Like many other protagonists in American fiction, he comes to a tragic end pursuing the American dream, the symbolic "Big Rock Candy Mountain." In addition, "people had been before him. The cream was gone. He should have lived a hundred years earlier," Rock Candy Mountain (p. 83) It is significant that the house of Mason seems cursed by bad father and son relationships. Bo, himself, was victim of a harsh and cruel father, a refugee and run-away from an unhappy home. Ironically enough, Bo illustrates a too-typical filial pattern. Though the sons may reject the father as a consequence, they do not reject the cruel code itself, the primitive rite of manhood applied to them, but pass it on to their own sons in turn. Bo says, "I was scared of water when I was a kid too, [but] that didn't keep my old man from throwing me in where it was ten feet

³⁵ Jensen, p. 8.

deep." Else counters, "You never liked your father, either. You'll have that child hating you like poison"; and Bo's reply is, "Then he'll just have to hate me" (p. 119). In the case of a sensitive boy like Bruce, the consequences of this blind adherence to a creed outworn are difficult to measure. A father's rubbing his child's face in his own excrement (as Bo did to Bruce) creates a permanent psychic wound, an immediate hatred of the father; but the long-term reaction of a Bruce Mason sort of intelligence may also take the form of a life-long commitment to the better understanding of humanity, of fathers and their sons. This idea is emphasized at the end of the novel when Bruce, as the last of the Masons, takes unto himself the responsibility for continuing the species; he will do it on his own terms according to his own definition of manhood:

Perhaps it took several generations to make a man, perhaps it took several combinations and re-creations of his mother's gentleness and resilience, his father's enormous energy and appetite for the new, subtle blending of masculine and feminine, selfish and selfless, a stubborn and yielding, before a proper man could be fashioned. (p. 563)

Rock Candy Mountain has been faulted for too much intimacy of material and for its lack of detachment. However, there must first be this intimacy of material before a novel can approach greatness, and the superiority of Rock Candy Mountain over Stegner's other early novels rests in this intimacy. If anything, the novel risks loss of this intimacy by its attempt to strike a too-cynical,

too-analytical, too-detached pose. But fortunately for the novel, the reader knows that the now mature Bruce is not telling it all when he hears him say of his life at the novel's close:

It was a good thing to have been
along and seen, a thing to be remembered
and told about, a thing that he and
his father had shared. (p. 563)

This tone of studied detachment fools no one. But the novel strikes the right distance between intimacy and detachment in spite of itself. The power of its feeling will not be suppressed. The fact that Bo might not get a fair shake when Bruce makes his final assessment of him does not seriously weaken the work. Bruce may not have the best judicial eyesight, especially in his own household; but for the most part, he sees "feelingly." The best part of the book is not its sociology or its pretense of offering up a perfectly balanced clinical study of Bo, for those parts are contained in the rhetorical portions of the book. The best parts are those fast-moving, richly vivid accounts of Bo's capers, of Bruce's boyhood on the frontier, of the tragicomic crises of the Masons, dragged along as they are in the wake of Bo's demonic quest. Bo is the only fully developed, memorable character in Stegner's early fiction--a real contribution to American literature. He is an overwhelming and awesome force in the novel who, fortunately, resists explication. Bruce is not able to completely or satisfactorily penetrate the mystery of his father's heart no matter how hard he flogs his

ghost. Like all sons, Bruce can never fully escape the power of his father. Else wisely notes at one point in the novel that for all Bo's

strength and violence he was oddly dependent in some ways, like a child. Like Bruce she thought in surprise. He was really more like Bruce than like Chester, though they had both always thought Chet the image of him.
(p. 166)

Bruce knows that he cannot deny the kinship, the disconcerting fact that there is a good bit of the father he pretends to hate in his own soul. Toward the novel's end, at Elsa's death bed, Bruce tries to muster contempt for the now pathetic shell of the once flamboyant Bo Mason:

It was incredible that at times in his childhood, he had watched the dark face of his father with love and admiration and trust.
(p. 506)

Bruce's final assessment is rendered during Bo's funeral in which he reviews, in reverie, the case against his father; he is forced to concede:

Yet this Harry Mason, violent and brutal and unthinking, this law breaker and blasphemer, kept for over a quarter of a century the love of as good a woman as ever walked, my mother, and when he appeared to abandon her just before his death, he did so because the prospect of her death was intolerable to him, because in spite of his bullying and self-willed spirit he loved and cherished her, and he knew that the best of himself would die when she died. (p. 561)

"The Blue Winged Teal," published much later, seems to further acknowledge the father's complexity of soul and the

mysterious, lingering hold of the father over the son. For readers acquainted with Rock Candy Mountain, it is easy to see that the father, John Lederer, and his son, Henry, are extensions of Bo and Bruce.

In this story, the son returns from college to his father's Salt Lake City saloon and pool hall without really knowing why: "What was there in this place to draw him back"? That nagging question is the theme of the story. Henry finds himself in a ritual that signifies his unconscious quest for his father's approval--a ritual that combines the rites of passage with the finality of the last supper. Henry goes hunting and brings home the game in trance-like obedience for his father and his disciples--the crude hands that work in the saloon: "He felt somehow that the thing would be incomplete unless he brought his game back for his father to see."³⁶ The game is then cleaned and cooked up for a grand feed served off the bar counter in a dismal and incongruous setting. There are strange, guarded nuances of understanding between father and son as they dine in silent memory of the dead mother for whom the color and symmetry of the Blue Winged Teal is a symbol. Henry is shocked to see his father capable of sentiment, of tears. Earlier, Henry had struggled with the enigma of his father and raged at himself "for the weak sympathy that had troubled him all evening." When the father rushes from the room in a rare show of emotion, he

³⁶ Wallace Stegner, "The Blue Winged Teal," The City of the Living, p. 2.

hurls an anguished look at Henry that seems to say, "You know nothing at all, you know less than nothing because you know things wrong" (p. 20). This is the chilling revelation that the son's pseudosophistication--his education and superficial wisdom--has kept from him. And though he feels compelled to notify his father at the story's end that he will be leaving, he informs him

not in anger, or with the cold command
of himself that he had imagined in
advance but like a cry, and with the
feeling he might have had on
letting go the hand of a friend
too weak and too exhausted to cling
any longer to their inadequate
shared driftwood in a wide cold sea.
(p. 22)

This story, first published in 1956, amounts to a final comment on and a closing out of the Bo-Bruce relationship. Coming as it does, long after the publication of Rock Candy Mountain and Bruce stories, it has the effect of a belated supplement to the judgments rendered on Bo in Rock Candy Mountain. It hints of one who has a desire to purge once and for all old haunting guilts, of an affirmation of an ancient filial bond, and of an acknowledgment of love shared in secret. One feels that the son will hence go in fear of judgments that might come "from knowing things wrong," of too quick a disposition to write off the human soul.

And as the opening story in the collection, The City of the Living, "The Blue Winged Teal" marks the beginning of a greater, enlarging humanity in those paternal relationships of the subsequent fiction. Three of the eight stories in

this collection are important in respect to the paternal theme. Of these, "The City of the Living" and "Impasse" are the first short stories to display a real depth of filial love on the part of the fathers. Both stories have contemporary settings that feature the fathers, both Californians, abroad with their children. The father in one finds himself tenderly nursing his one son through a bout of typhoid in an Egyptian town, while "Impasse" offers a father-daughter relationship, an uncomely daughter whose father is anxious that she find the romance she dreams of on the French Riviera. These stories movingly present fathers in anguish, fathers touched with "pity and love" for the plights of their children. In Field Guide, the penultimate piece in the volume and the first to feature Joe Allston, Joe, like Henry, is confronted with the enigma of sharing something with one he is trying to hate. Not unlike Conrad's "Secret Sharer," both Joe and the obnoxious young "Polish" pianist, Kaminski, recognize in each other dark nuances of mutual dislike. These vibrant chords build all during Kaminski's performance and post-performance discussions, climaxing at the close of the evening when the drunk Kaminski declares, "you disliked me the minute you met me, and you've been watching me all night" (p. 187). Joe checks his contempt for fear of "knowing things wrong," in recognition of the vagaries of "glandular geniuses," the complexity of the human heart, the dark side of the soul, and the fact that "they don't give you enough time in a single life time to figure anything out."

At the story's end, Joe and wife Ruth grope through the heavy fog for home. "All blind, all difficult and blind." This ending symbolism is obviously related to the story's opening in which Joe, after making one wall of his study into a glass wall, is lured into bird watching. For in Kaminski Joe has gotten hold of another inscrutable bird. His study will be "swallowed in fog," his glass door (his lens) obscured (pp. 193-194).

As the forerunner and predecessor of the California novels, Field Guide introduces a variation of a familiar pattern or an inversion, roughly, of the parental tyranny of Rock Candy Mountain and Bruce stories. In Field Guide and subsequent novels, one finds the tyranny of sons replacing the tyranny of fathers or the tyranny of children replacing the tyranny of parents. Joe Allston in Field Guide uses the same epithet for Kaminski that he later uses for Peck in Little Live Things--"Caliban." They are both spoiled children with artistic temperaments, and Joe Allston as ex-literary agent has, in his lifetime, played father to "a good many petulant G.G.s [Glandular Geniuses]" (Field Guide, p. 143). But while Joe might feel some paternalism for them, he is also the secret sharer of their black intuitions. Joe sees himself in Kaminski, who is like Peck, who is like Curtis, Joe's dead son who has committed suicide. Joe cannot convince himself that he is not somehow responsible for his son's death and is consequently an easy target for the Calibans who, without knowing it, can trade on his guilt and the ghost of Curtis.

So it is with Peck, who holds an evil power over Joe in spite of the latter's hostility and contempt. Peck is able to do pretty much as he pleases on Joe's property, finding a home in the poison oak under Joe's broad, paternal umbrella. The major triangulation points in this novel, are Marian, Peck, and Joe, or as one reviewer puts it, "Happy," "Hippy," and "Grumpy," respectively.³⁷ Joe finds himself serving as reluctant parent to surrogate son, Peck, affectionate mentor to surrogate daughter, Marian, and philosophical foil to both. Joe is especially infatuated with the lovely Marian, who carries a simple philosophy of acceptance and is an unabashed lover of "all the little live things." On the other hand, Peck

was like a visitation--beard, motorcycle and all, and his head rattled with all the familiar loose marbles. He angered me in a remembered way, he made me doubt myself all afresh. And there was a threat in him, a demand that he and his bug house faiths be somehow dealt with (p. 10)

Peck represents the left, Joe the moderate right, and Marian is in between. Ruth, from a distance, serves as moderator while the ghost of Curtis informs the whole family. Peck is off stage most of the time but the confrontation of values is presented by Joe's grumbling to Ruth and Marian, primarily. Joe toys with Marian and her charitable philosophy. While he is good humored, he is patronizing. Of course,

³⁷ Peter Buitenhuis, New York Times Book Review, 6 August, 1967, p. 30.

Peck's scrambled faith represents an easy target for Joe's big intellectual guns. Peck is a composite of all the foolish excesses of youth in the sixties. Nevertheless, it is the "children," Peck and Marian, who bear lessons for father, Joe. Of the two, it is Marian whose loyal commitment to her simple faith, even when dying of cancer, has the most effect on Joe and Ruth. Although Peck challenges every faith Joe holds, it is Marian who really threatens the peace. She "offered us love . . . she turned over our rock." Both Peck and Marian draw Joe back into the humanity he has withdrawn from where he finds himself "implicated, entangled, and oppressed" (pp. 8, 10)

Marian's all-encompassing love includes Peck and his promiscuous "camp of Howler Monkeys." Peck becomes a source of contention between Joe and Marian and the reader is not hard put to see in this surrogate triangle a father and son competing for the sympathy of the daughter. Consequently, Joe is prompted at the novel's mid-point to write a long letter to Marian in an attempt to explain his complicated attitude toward Peck and its relationship to his dead son, Curtis. Richard Moseley claims that this letter is the "true measure of the fullness of [Joe's] conversion to an acceptance and affirmation of life's necessary bittersweet quality."³⁸ But although the letter is an indication of the

³⁸ Richard Moseley, "First Person Narration in Wallace Stegner's All the Little Live Things," Notes on Contemporary Literature, 3, No. 2 (1973), 12-13.

degree to which Joe has started to come out of his burrow and to get involved in life, it does not amount to a conversion to the bittersweet because Joe has always been bittersweet--it is all sweet. Joe's only conversion is from non-involvement to involvement. More significantly, Joe's confessional is not admission of guilt--it only confesses the feeling of guilt where there is no reason for it. Joe cannot separate love from respect and he does not change his position. If the letter does anything, it convinces the reader that Curtis was a twenty four karat loser on almost every level. Joe's letter is more rationalization than confession. At the letter's close, he concludes:

So you see why this Peck exasperates me? He reminds me of things I don't want to remember. He threatens me, he endangers my peace. If he and Curtis are the future, then I am the irreconcilable past. They leave me nothing, not even the comfort of blindness, because I think I see them clearly--as clearly as I see my own incapacity to accept them or deal with them. (p. 195)

But Joe goes on to say that he "can't dismiss them either," and therein lies the dilemma of all parents for whom it is no great comfort to see clearly, to be "right." One cannot just order up love, even for a son. To "see" them is not to love them. To do so would be to surrender sense. But one may always be vulnerable to "doubt all afresh," to the fear of "knowing things wrong," to the desire to reach the "unreachable privacy" of a son's heart. Joe's manifesto should have offered cathartic comfort, nonetheless, not only to Joe

himself, but to all the beleaguered fathers of the sixties. A bothersome quality about the letter is its excesses. The reader feels that Joe violates propriety by spilling too much--that he is approaching melodrama, and that his humility has a pretentious ring about it. Joe is a bit of a grandstander in spite of himself. This irksome quality is borne out in another place in the novel--at Fran LoPresti's party. Fran considers Joe her art-father-critic and is anxious to gain his approval of her iron sculpture. Because he is justifiably resentful at being trapped into a "lot of dishonest art criticism" the moment they arrive, he finds himself telling her lies. Later, Fran overhears the now-drunk Joe making fun of her "Ashcan Hound" as he confides in one sporting Annie Williamson. The quip breaks Annie up, but it costs him Fran's friendship and trust. Joe curses himself, but his contrition is not exactly convincing. One feels that he prizes the triumph with Annie more than he suffers the loss of Fran's friendship, and that the wisecrack was worth the cost in spite of Joe's soul-searching; he would do it again; he would lose the world for it. Of course, no one can deny that Joe is devoutly human and the Fourth of July party at LoPresti's is one of the highlights of the book.

Not quite as whimsical in Angle of Repose is Lyman Ward, whose son Rodman is a sociologist. The novel involves four generations represented on the men's side by three sets of fathers and sons: Oliver-Ollie, Ollie-Lyman, and Lyman-Rodman in order from past to present. There are three

significant triangles, the first of which is the paternal triangle of Lyman, Rodman, and surrogate daughter, Shelley Rassmussen. The other two represent "illicit" triangles in the sense that both are products of a wife's betrayal: the one in the past consisting of Oliver, Sue, and Frank; the one present consisting of Lyman, Ellen, and the doctor--the surgeon who took Lyman's leg and then ran off with his wife, Ellen. These two triangles work in counterpoint throughout the novel and underscore one of Stegner's principle themes--the use of the past as aid in the present.

In this novel, Lyman is more conspicuously on the defensive than was Joe in Little Live Things; Lyman is buffeted on the one side by physical problems, infirmity, and on the other by ex-wife Ellen and son Rodman, who consider Lyman their Ward, bringing their gratuitous and presumptuous guardianship to bear on Lyman's private life. They feel that Lyman's incapacity is more than physical, for anyone who voluntarily isolates himself in hermitic exile to sift through the family history has got to be on the edge of senility.

One of the curious and comical inversions in Angle of Repose is that Ward is the unwilling object of misguided, misinformed, and pompous paternalism from all quarters. Guardianship is one of the novel's major themes and it works on several levels. Lyman appears to be the guardian of history, tradition, and the time-tested verities of moderation, rationality, and personal integrity as he fights a rear

guard battle in behalf of these all through the novel, trying to ward off all the forces that surround and threaten his island of peace and privacy--the Zodiac Cottage. He is at a much better vantage point from which to resist the moral senility which is a product of the times--the disease that threatens the advocates of ill-founded creeds--Rodman, Shelley, and Ellen. But Lyman's superiority here is more intellectual than moral, something he realizes at the novel's closing--that he has been guilty of the same kind of rigidity and righteousness that brought about the estrangement of his grandparents; this self awareness brings about a change in his attitude towards his wife:

For though Ellen Ward was not here this afternoon and evening, I am sure she will be here, or her representatives will be here, sooner or later. If she does not come of her own volition, or at Rodman's urging, I can even conceive, in this slack hour, that I might send for her. Could I? Would I? (p. 568)

Rodman and Shelley represent varieties of the Berkeley radicals. Rodman is one of the human engineers who has enlisted modern technology in the service of his discipline which is devoted to the criticism of the technical society. He is an academic radical, a sociologist. Armed with computers, data sheets, and officious jargon, he sets about dehumanizing human relations. As Lyman puts it:

He, Rodman Ward, culture hero born fully armed from this history-haunted skull, will be happy to provide blueprints, or perhaps ultimatums and

manifestos, that will save us and bring on a life of true freedom. The family too. Marriage and the family as we have known them are becoming extinct. He is Paul Goodman out of Margaret Mead. (p. 18)

Though their ostensible relationship is "affectionate," Lyman harbors so much contempt for his son's beliefs that one wonders how much room is left for affection. Though love cannot exist without respect, respect can exist without love. Rodman apparently "means well" and has character. He is not an insidious Bohemian like Peck, given to trading on the current fads that will disguise his own personal and parasitic sloth. Peck would never suffer for his causes. On the other hand, Rodman is committed to his beliefs with the stubbornness, righteousness, and absolutism of a fascist. Besides that, he has the necessary energy and resources to implement those beliefs and is therefore capable of a lot more mischief than is Peck. He has the futurists' faith in a "progress" defined in terms of moral expediency. He could ship off his parents to Menlo Park without batting an eye. Not only that, he works from the inside out. He is part of the establishment, of a society that seems ready and eager to provide a Rodman with a laboratory and respectability. Joe Allston says in Little Live Things that "if I were painting a portrait of the father of evil, I wonder if I wouldn't give him the face of a high-minded fool" (p. 90). Joe thinks that Peck is dangerous, too, but it is easy enough to blow his house down once Joe decides to do it.

Peck's mischief has little chance of getting institutionalized, in contrast to Rodman's.

Though in most ways a female counterpart of Peck's, Shelley is a refugee from Peckdom, a veteran of the commune. As Lyman's secretary, she finds temporary relief from her Peck-like husband who, throughout the novel, continues to search for her, threatening the cottage with physical and philosophical trespass. Again, as with Marian, Joe sports with the bug house faiths she inherited from her husband. Like Marian's, her intellect is not to be taken seriously. Lyman and his "children," for that matter, are condescending toward each other's philosophy. But Shelley is not a threat as is Rodman, and Lyman finds some congeniality in her joy of rapping and in her sensuality. She is big in "truth parties," those

open hearted, open ended sessions
that the young have adapted from the
David Susskind show and learned to
call education combined with
encounter techniques they can empty
the well and cleanse the soul
and bore the hell out of anybody
over twenty five. (p. 267)

A crude, coarse girl, Shelly is, nevertheless, sincere, candid, and full of activist zeal. She has a good fund of horse sense, too, but Lyman, when invited to respond to her Utopian schemes, blunts the edge of that zeal with acid comment on the pecking order in Peckdom, for instance:

Satisfying natural desires is fine,
but natural desires have a way of
being both competitive and consequential.

And women may be equal to men, but they aren't equal in attractiveness anymore than men are. (p. 317)

Nor can Lyman forget that "good old wild Thoreau wound up a tame surveyor of Concord house lots" (p. 519). Lyman complains about Shelley's ribald streak but responds with ribaldry of his own: "If she didn't wear pants most of the time at work, even the great stone Homer might nod and kink his neck," says Lyman (p. 164). He later confesses hot erections rising from his "mutilated lap," and near the novel's close there is a bit of Freudian slapstick in which Lyman dreams that Shelley and ex-wife, Ellen, compete for the privilege of giving him a bath. Shelley wins out, discovers Lyman's erection, and exclaims, "you old dickens, look at that!" (p. 566) But these comic touches are the minor by-products of the Lyman, Rodman, Shelley triangle, the most significant structural device in the novel for forwarding Lyman's rich commentary on contemporary times, the generation "gulf." They provide the comic relief in the alternating past and present sections of the book. Here, too, as in Little Live Things, the reader can see the progressive softening of the narrator as the novel unfolds. The ending of Angle of Repose is a comment on Lyman's developing humanity with its suggested continuation of Bruce's beginning search for that perfected state of manhood initiated at the close of Rock Candy Mountain. While Lyman, like his father and his grandfather before him, is

satisfied at one point in the novel that "if justice is observed, mercy is forever unnecessary" (p. 443), he wonders in the novel's last sentence if, "I am man enough to be a bigger man than my grandfather" (p. 569). Unlike his grandfather, Lyman seems ready to consider mercy an essential component of "manhood," and the prospects for a reconciliation with his wife seem promising. Otherwise, Lyman, his grandfather and his father, have all been the victims of feminine betrayal. Only Rodman breaks the pattern.

In contrast, A Shooting Star has a strong feminist theme to it which finds its center in the mother/daughter relationship of Deborah and Sabrina. Here, Deborah Hutchins, elderly matriarch of means, is in a position somewhat like Lyman's in that she is besieged by both the threat of infirmity and of a son, Oliver, who is much more like Rodman than the gentle Olivers of Angle of Repose. But this Oliver outdoes Rodman in being an insensitive bulldog and a practical, ruthless Philistine, looking for an excuse to pack off his mother to a Menlo Park. Both Rodman and Oliver would "develop" the land after taking care of their parents.

Deborah, like Lyman, is trying to buy time in order to finish her work with four generations of the family history, what one might call the Wolcott papers. And like Lyman, Deborah has a secretary, Helen, who becomes a surrogate daughter. Helen later becomes the object of some jealousy on the part of Deborah's own wayward daughter, Sabrina, who at the novel's start is a family outsider.

The main story, however, is Sabrina's search for a father, a search that eventually brings her full circle to the family papers, to the family for which she originally had so much indifference, if not contempt. Like Little Live Things and Angle of Repose, A Shooting Star reveals a process in the conversion of the protagonist, as Sabrina gradually changes from outsider to insider, an accepted member of the round table where those entrusted with the family memoirs hold talk sessions about their contents.

Sabrina, though an attractive and intelligent woman, is also the lost waif looking for the father in her husband, her lover, and finally in her intellectual guru, Leonard MacDonald, who thinks that there is a good bit of substance to Sabrina "if she could ever quit being the leading lady in her own melodrama" (p. 366). At one point she confesses to Leonard that

I've got a cyst where my father ought
to be. . . . All the time I was a
child I hung around asking for love
from my mother and instead I had it
impressed on me that I was something
dreadful, like hereditary syphilis, that
had got injected into the Wolcott
blood stream
.
I married a father substitute and that
didn't work because he really was father,
he thought he was obliged to train my
character; and then I had an affair with
another father, and that didn't work.
(p. 371)

Like Stegner's other major characters in the California novels, she is possessed of a sharp tongue and an oversupply of self-irony and suffers from too much self-analysis. She

and Leonard conclude that her search for the father obsession, with its Freudian overtones, has contributed to her sexual waywardness. This concurrence takes place during one of their many "smart talk" sessions in which Sabrina, in a drunken display of frustration, offers herself to Leonard. But Sabrina's plight is more than the act that Leonard takes it for, and he is later taken aback to learn that she actually had tried to commit suicide that same evening.

Sabrina's reconciliation with life occurs when she takes up temporary refuge at the family estate in Palo Alto and is gradually drawn to the family papers. She comes to realize that if she "descended into [her] family and snooped around among the frustrated and lost and asked them who they were in life and why they were punished," they might teach her something (p. 228). After doing so, she finds comfort in the fact that her forthcoming bastard child will have plenty of company in being fatherless: "neither for different reasons had her mother [a real father] ; neither to all intents and purposes, had her grandmother and the great aunts. It seemed a Wolcott prerogative" (p. 385). And so Sabrina finds numerous comforting parallels. Once she gets absorbed in the family chronicle, she becomes a fellow traveler with assorted family waifs. She finds that it is the fate of the Wolcott girls to be "either sterile or desperately late." She also feels some kinship for great-uncle Mercer, who "hunted himself around the world for 65 to 70 years and he never did find anything he was for" (p. 273).

Once Sabrina becomes part of the round table, she works herself back into the heart of her Victorian mother and joins the gang of good people (mostly women) who gang up on Oliver. Oliver is out of patience with Deborah's reckless and eccentric philanthropy, wants to declare his mother legally incompetent, to take power of attorney unto himself, and to develop the Woodside land, about three fourths of the estate. (Developers and bulldozers present a special kind of modern evil for Stegner, a violation of nature, perhaps.) But largely through Sabrina's cool intervention on behalf of her mother, Oliver is forced to compromise--two hundred acres for development and two hundred for the park which Leonard is promoting as a community project.

At the novel's close, Sabrina finds a measure of peace and understanding which helps her re-order her own life with some perspective and confidence. This final coming to grips with destiny and time is symbolized by Sabrina's "moment of clear vision":

Was all her meaning inside here?
She acknowledged the possibility, at
least as real a possibility as her
resolution of a half hour ago to
turn walls into windows and let air
into the old crypt of a house. (p. 411)

Of course, letting in air also lets in light. But unlike Joe Allston, who changed his wall into a window at the beginning of Field Guide, Sabrina willingly "gets caught," finding comfort in the light with its accompanying commandment to pursue her own star, to strive after the knowledge infinite.

The Spectator Bird, Stegner's latest novel, marks an extension of this larger Faustian quest/search for identity of which the search for the father is a part. It picks up where Little Live Things leaves off. Joe Allston, now close to seventy, is caught by Ruth digging into his old diary of their Danish trip taken twenty years earlier in 1954. She coaxes him into reading it to her and hence the novel's plot structure, Joe's bedtime reading to Ruth passages of the diary punctuated by his own verbal commentary. Joe claims that the purpose of the Danish trip, the pilgrimage to his mother's cottage in the little town of Bregninge, Denmark, was existential; "Who am I? How to be? What is the meaning of everything?" (p. 21). However, reading the diary is not a pleasant experience. Opening the diary is like "opening a grave" or letting the tarantula out of the bottle, the ghosts of some memories as soon forgotten, and a renewal of those disturbing existential questions. The novel's format provides the reader with an updated version, a double portrait of the Joe Allston he first came to know in Field Guide. For here is the Joe Allston of 1974 reviewing the Joe Allston of 1954. But it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. He is the same old grumbling Joe given to self-irony. As he puts it:

Young, middle-aged, or getting old, Joe Allston had always been full of himself, uncertain, dismayed, dissatisfied with his life, his country, his civilization, his profession and himself. He has always hunted himself in places where he has never been . . .

he has always been hungry for some continuity and assurance and sense of belonging, but has never had ancestors or descendants or place in the world. Little orphan Joe, what a sad case.

(p. 23)

Once the diary's cover is lifted, Joe's two persistent ghosts--his mother's and his son's--come to plague him again. They are the two influences that feed his hunger and his compulsion for roots. However, the reader learns shortly that finding one's ancestors can be a sordid boon. This theme is reinforced by the Hamlet motif which also furnishes other appropriate symbolism relating to fathers and sons and mothers.

Once in Denmark, Joe finds that the roads to his ancestral home are paved with incest. The whole trip, for that matter, is freighted with Gothic forebodings. During the initial ocean voyage, the Allstons become acquainted with an elderly couple of Swedish descent, the Bertelsons, who are also making a pilgrimage to their ancestral source. Mr. Bertelson dies on the trip over, and the symbolism of his death, his burial at sea, is a powerful reminder to Joe, who cannot forget "that it was in the ocean . . . that Curtis was knocked from his surfboard, and his last breath was water" (p. 39). Curtis had also made a trip to Denmark, and subsequently, the identities of Joe, Curtis, and Bertelson become intertwined in allegorical parallel--each looking for his "safe place."

The "safe place" as home and security, actual and symbolic, is a theme that is given both particularity and

universality in The Spectator Bird. Like all humanity, the characters that emerge from the pages of Joe's diary are groping toward that safe place.

In Denmark, Joe meets Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen), novelist of Africa, who seems to function as witch-oracle. With a freshly exhumed runestone in her hand, she scorns safety. "Nevertheless, she came home in the end," says Joe. "She carries her safety on her back" (p. 109). Then Joe ruminates on the subject of safety, home, and the dead son, Curtis:

Do I hate the thought of Curtis'
death more because he never fulfilled
himself, or more because he never
fulfilled me? Did he know how gladly
we would have opened our door, how
carefully we would have avoided making
his return a humiliation of his pride?
(p. 109)

But then this impulse for unqualified love, mercy, and acceptance is checked, as it is in Little Live Things, by the rational side of his ambiguity--that side of him that cannot be dismissed:

And do I know for sure that I could
have been wise and open? . . . which
is deeper a father's love or a dis-
appointed father's contempt?

Joe then wonders whether Curtis, too, was hunting a safe place when he visited Denmark and concludes "that what brought my mother and a lot of others to the new world was precisely the hope of safety, not any lust for freedom" (p. 109).

These comments on Curtis and Joe's mother are from the pages of the diary, and when Joe and Ruth discuss Curtis in

the next section of the novel (present time, representing a time span of 20 years), Joe reveals the same moral dilemma which plagued him in Little Live Things--the inability to completely absolve himself of guilt feelings even though he might be solidly planted on the side of reason. He is not able to overcome a disappointed father's contempt for the son who "just quit. He turned belly up" (p. 112).

But still, Joe seems ready to accept a larger share of blame for having taught Curtis to despise the world and these last comments on the son seem to mark an advance towards the peace that passeth understanding, towards the wisdom which is not perfectly equated with reason. As he and Ruth look at each other "across fifteen feet of our last mutual sanctuary, she in the bed one or both of us will die in," Joe ponders:

What do you think? If he'd
lived would he finally have joined
us? I think so, Ruth said. I have
to think so. (p. 113)

And thus The Spectator Bird hints of a reconciliation in which righteousness and reason are slowly dissolved in the milk of parental love. As the aging Allstons muse in bed, they become the spiritual companions of the other characters in the book who unconsciously seek safety in the arms of "cool enfolding death."

One of the lessons of wisdom is that safety on this earth, at least, is an illusion and that the reality of having ancestors is less than comforting. Whatever Joe seeks in Denmark is not found; he finds only more irony in the possibility that his real ancestral source may be complicated

in incest. He had always envied Rødding for one thing-- that "he belonged to something." But upon examination, he discovers that something sordid and his envy bogus. So Joe, like the tourist hunting for his own name in the graveyard, is still hungry after having come round about. Of the Danish episode he concludes that it was "not worth the price of admission":

. . . it reminds me too much of
how little life changes: how without
dramatic events or high resolves,
without tragedy, without even pathos,
a reasonably endowed, reasonably
well-intentioned man can walk through
the world's great kitchen from end to
end and arrive at the back door
hungry. (p. 69)

Poor little orphan Joe--without monuments and without sons-- nevertheless assumes the duties of Everyman in following knowledge like a sinking star and denying himself the comfort of blindness.

PART III

POETIC EFFECT: THE GHOST OF MEMORY

Ideas should haunt a piece
of fiction as a ghost flits
past an attic window after
dark.³⁹

While Mr. Stegner's collective criticism places a premium on clarity, it also stresses the importance of the poetic effect that admits of mystery. In his essay, "One Way to Spell Man," he claims that

art is incurably iconic, but not objective; a better adjective would be "clear eyed." The artist himself is a lens to see through, and I cannot see how the worth of any work of art can be based upon anything but the testing--by the best audiences over a considerable length of time--of the artist's insight. The proof of art, in other words, is in the response, in the aesthetic response.⁴⁰

In rare instances, Stegner continues, when the "human instrument is clear eyed, the linguistic instrument evocative, and the audience adequate, who will deny that literature can bring us truths; . . ." And that "truth" seems to be a poetic truth which Stegner would rank "a little above history."⁴¹ It is enveloped in mystery and thus the artist is a "dealer in mysteries." The aesthetic experience is private, mystical and "never quite

³⁹ Stegner, "A Lens on Life," p. 10.

⁴⁰ Wallace Stegner, "One Way to Spell Man," Saturday Review, 24 May 1958, p. 11.

⁴¹ Wallace Stegner, Wolf Willow: A History, A Story, and A Memory of the Last Plains Frontier (New York: Viking, 1962), p. 307.

communicable."⁴²

These remarks penetrate to the heart of Stegner's art aesthetic. The artist, through his method and his theme, strives for the aesthetic response, the poetic effect, or that "final proof." But while he might acknowledge striving for the mystical effect, his means (in Stegner's case, at least) will not be mystical. The distinction between "objective" and "clear eyed," apparently, is that the latter would maintain rationality while allowing for the subjectivity of passion.

Another part of Stegner's artistic creed from "A Lens on Life" is the "intense acquaintance" principle:

In all our [the readers'] wandering through real or fictional worlds it is probably ourselves we seek, and since that encounter is impossible we want the next best thing--the completely intimate contact which may show us another like ourselves.⁴³

And that one like ourselves, readers are given to believe, is the artist, for one looks through the lens (art) for the artist's "purified and honestly offered spirit." In addition, "the ghosts of meaning that flit by the windows of his fictional house wear his face."⁴⁴ The poetic effect, then, is determined by the degree to which the reader's identity merges with that of the author. Holding hands with his

⁴² "One Way to Spell Man," p. 11.

⁴³ "A Lens on Life," p. 11.

⁴⁴ "A Lens on Life," p. 34.

soul's twin is the closest the reader may come to touching the face of God.

The above ideas on the nature and purpose of art typify Stegner's aesthetic, which makes frequent references to ghosts and mystery on the one hand, and to clarity on the other. When the aesthetic is working most effectively, the result is Stegner's peculiar brand of controlled mysticism or rational subjectivity. If his own works are evidence, then Stegner believes that the mystical effect is best served by the artist, himself, resisting mysticism and the mystical modes so popular in this century--hallucination, fantasy, and the pure forms of the stream of consciousness. The controlling agents of Stegner's aesthetic are reason and light which keep a tight rein on the imagination. Consequently, the resulting impression is one of confidence and authority rather than that of the uncertain metaphysician twanging his instrument in the dark.

If one tests Stegner's works by his own aesthetic principle as outlined above, the results are mixed. The direct delineation of idea that accompanies the polemical portion of his work--as in Fire and Ice, Darkling Plain, and the California novels--is contrary to his aesthetic notion that ideas should "haunt a piece of fiction as a ghost flits past an attic window after dark." Ideas in the California novels are more likely to have the effect of sledge hammers than ghosts flitting past the attic. This is not to discredit them, for their appeal is intended for the intellect rather

than the heart and the soul. Those political/social ideas of Joe Allston and Lyman Ward, for instance, might tickle the wit, enrage, enlighten, or reinforce established prejudice--and couched in the metaphors of aphorism will have their own kind of poetry. But it is not the kind that lends itself to sublimity and transport. Also, when the reader senses the author indulging himself in these polemics, he feels the curtains, rich as they are, being drawn between himself and that "honestly offered spirit of the artist." Lyman's wrangling with Shelley over the issue of collective sex, for example, does much for the vitality of Angle of Repose but does not enhance its poetic effect:

"I think you're describing a kind of hell," I said. "You're talking about people who have become sub-human. Sub-mammal. Sub-worm. I wonder if even bilharzia worms, which are locked in copulation all their lives, ever sit around and watch other bilharzia worms copulate? I think our sickness has gone so far we aren't even sure it's sickness." (p. 271)

On the other hand, these polemic portions of Stegner's novels do not represent the larger themes that underlie those works--those broader, implicit, humanistic themes born out of paternal love and tenderness. The polemical/political wit combat is never the whole of the novel but is offered sometimes as comic relief or as an alternative to the narrative that is more congenial to Stegner's ghosts of meaning.

In respect to that meaning, one might turn to Emily Dickinson's claim that "art is the house that tries to be haunted," for that aesthetic speaks for Stegner and his

ghosts. When he is most successful, he haunts his house not by telling it "slant" but by telling it straight. And for the best illustration of his clear-eyed mysticism, one might hold up the following: "Maiden in a Tower," "The Blue-Winged Teal," "The City of the Living," some passages from Rock Candy Mountain, and Wolf Willow. Of Stegner's fiction, these are the works that offer the most soul and feeling and a poetic truth that sometimes approaches religious vision.

Of these, "Maiden in a Tower" is one of his most lyrical as well as one of his best short stories, even though it is unheralded in comparison with "The Blue Winged Teal." But like the other works just cited, it finds Stegner trafficking in nostalgia. That is when he is most evocative and most tender--when the curtains are opened and the soul bared. Of course, he risks bathos, but his strength in these works is his controlled sentimentality.

The opening pages of "Maiden in a Tower" present a favorite Stegner pattern--a pilgrimage into the past, a going home. Kimball Harris is returning to Salt Lake City, his home town, after an absence of twenty five years:

"middle-aged, rather tired, but alert with the odd notion that he was returning both through distance and time.

. . ."⁴⁵ The occasion of his visit is to bury his "old aunt Margaret, never very loveable, never dear to him in his childhood, and in his maturity only a duty and an expense."

⁴⁵ Wallace Stegner, "Maiden in a Tower," The City of the Living, p. 68.

When Kimball arrives in Salt Lake City, he discovers that the funeral home is located in an old stone house with a three-story tower--the same house that he had frequented in his college days, the same tower where Holly had lived, the queen of the jazz-aged Bohemians who had "eddie" around her queenly shape with noises like broken china." At this point, Kimball's mind is flooded with recollection and nostalgia. Upon entering the funeral home, he is confronted by its director, the young man McBride who, though officious, "looked better equipped to write fragile verses than deal with corpses." But McBride takes pride in his work and invites Harris to visit the aunt for whom Kimball can muster no feeling. Now Harris feels the pull of nostalgia like an "upward draft" and self-consciously requests that he be allowed to go upstairs to visit the tower apartment where Holly had roomed. The tower has not yet been renovated but McBride cheerfully obliges Harris:

"Go on up if you want," McBride said. "The only thing, there's a woman laid out there."

.
For a moment Harris hung on the word, and on the thought that McBride's professional vanity was one of the odder kinds, and on a little fit of irritability that a corpse should intrude upon a sentimental but perfectly legitimate impulse. Then he put his hand on the mahogany rail. "Maybe I will." (p. 74)

At this point the real substance of the story begins, with Harris climbing the stair for a rendezvous with memory:

And he climbed against the pressure of a crowd of ghosts. The carpet ended at the stairhead; he put his feet down softly and

held back his breath with the wild notion that he heard voices from the door of Holly's old apartment. Up these stairs, a hundred, two hundred, three hundred times, through how long? a year? two years? he had come with books or bottles or manuscripts in his hands and (it seemed to him now) an incomparable capacity for enthusiasm in his heart. From the high burlap-hung windows of the apartment inside they had let their liquid ridicule fall on the streets of the bourgeois city. He half expected, as he moved into the doorway, to see their faces look up inquiringly from the chair and couch and floor. (p. 74)

When he reaches the room, he finds only the dead woman and he stands for a minute or two in the doorway "stopped partly by the body and partly by the feeling of an obscure threat: he must summon and gather and recreate his recollections of this room; he was walking in a strange neighborhood and needed his own gang around him" (p. 74).

A nice feature of this first part of the story is that Stegner does not let the symbolism rage out of control. There is no sense of contrivance. He is not trading on the implicit Freudianism of the tower and the stairs, for instance. And while the reader senses a spiritual ascendancy during the climb to the tower, he is taken only to the lower levels of mysticism. A sense of the real controls whatever mysticism is suggested by the swarming memories; there is always a hand on the rail and a foot on the stair.

As Harris stands in the apartment doorway, his mind fills with voices, echoes, and ghosts of the gay parties held in that room while the dead woman of time present serves

as an appropriate foil to the life of time past. All the symbols of counterforce, - life/death, past/present, youth/age - are present in the room. Then

he felt the stairs in his legs, the years in his mind, as he went in softly past the woman who lay so quietly on her back, and when he had passed her, he turned and searched her face, almost as if he might surprise in it some expression meaningful to this wry confusing return. (p. 76)

The woman wears a Navajo Squash-blossom necklace around her throat and Kimball develops a kinship and tenderness for the woman whose necklace she has "stubbornly worn even past the age when costume jewelry became her. It gave her a touching, naively rakish air." It is not unreasonable to imagine the dead woman as an extension of Holly, with whom Kimball had shared a special intimacy. Kimball remains in reverie, his mind occasionally returning from the dreams past to the dead woman--the cold reality of the present. He reminisces about roads not taken that might have made all the difference--about the significant moment in his life when Holly had offered herself to him--how that moment had become symbolic of a choice that had grown significant with time. It had come to represent his failure to seize the day, to live dangerously; he had chosen, instead, to live by prudence, that "rich ugly old maid courted by incapacity" that he and Holly had mocked. But now it seems to him that "his failure to take her when she offered herself was one of the saddest failures of his life" even though he knows that he might make the same crucial choices all over again. But this

self-realization is of little help, for the past "had trapped him and it held him like pain."

As Kimball is about to leave the room, his thoughts turn in requiem to the dead woman:

What was her name, what had she died of . . . who mourned her, who had loved her . . . would they think it disagreeable that a total stranger had been alone with her here staring into her dead face? . . . Alone with her here, before the arrival of others, before she went away, he felt almost an anguish for this woman he had never known. . . . (p. 82)

When Kimball leaves, he means to tiptoe out, but he hears "almost with panic the four quick raps his heels made on the bare floor before they found the consoling softness of the stairs" (p. 83).

In this story, then, Stegner has skillfully managed to indulge in sentiment without lapsing into bathos. Much like Fitzgerald, he employs a tone that includes faint cynicism to check whatever melodrama accompanies the feelings of love, tenderness, and nostalgia. The story echoes Fitzgerald in other ways too, to say nothing of Yeats, Proust, and Eliot in respect to towers, winding stairs, time, memory, and eternity. Kimball's tender memories, which contain an assessment of the Jazz Age in the West, remind one of Fitzgerald's stories--"Winter Dreams," for instance; here, after having carried a torch for a Jazz age queen most of his life, the protagonist has occasion in a brief moment of clear vision to see the irony and insignificance of his dream and folly

when set against time and eternity. And so Kimball's epiphany with the dead woman has him, for a brief moment, holding infinity in his palm while apprehending the intersection of time with the timeless. And it is time and memory that seem to be Stegner's major preoccupation in his literature of power. The tone always includes the lingering wish to stop time or to liberate love from its limitations. In that sense it speaks for all mankind in its unconscious desire to know the timelessness within time--a theme so movingly presented in Proust's Remembrance of Things Past.

Several references in Stegner's literature suggest that Proust has had considerable influence on his works. Stegner made the comment recently that he was still "looking for his past" and hoped to recover something of it through the re-reading of Proust.⁴⁶ He has also confessed to more Proustian impulses in this particular story, "Maiden in a Tower," than in any other.⁴⁷ It may be that Proustian impulses are the primary stimuli to Stegner's most evocative and poetic work. Like Proust, he seems to possess some of those "fixed laws of the spirit" in which particular objects, sensations, or smells recalled from memory come to have specific meaning for him. For when he makes another pilgrimage to the source in Wolf Willow, it is that peculiar fragrance of the shrub,

⁴⁶ Stegner, in conversation, June 11, 1976.

⁴⁷ Comment on "Maiden in a Tower," in The World of Fiction: Stories in Context, Eds. T. Y. Greet, C. D. Edge, and John Munro (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), p. 308.

the wolf willow, more than anything else, that brings him home:

It is with me all at once, what I came hoping to re-establish, an ancient, unbearable recognition, and it comes partly from the children and the foot-bridge and the river's quiet curve, but much more from the smell. For here, pungent and pervasive, is the smell that has always meant my childhood. I have never smelled it anywhere else, and it is as evocative as Proust's madeleine and tea . . . the tantalizing and ambiguous and wholly native smell is no more than the shrub we called Wolf Willow now blooming with small yellow flowers. (p. 18)

Stegner makes this fragrance the motif for the book, Wolf Willow, which is haunted by the mystery of memory that transcends time. In a similar manner, it is the objects, sounds, smells, and sensations that inform portions of Rock Candy Mountain, that traverse the space between past and present with the speed of light. The enigma of memory is one of the common subjects of Stegner's interiors such as that of Elsa:

Her hair brush lay smooth and rounded and solid in her hand. She felt it there, something she could put down if she chose, but she did not put it down. She liked its solid familiar feel. That was the way with things you remembered. You could put them down if you chose, but didn't quite choose. (p. 78)

Then there is the trip to the Bearpaw Mountains when the family was located on the farm in Saskatchewan. This incident contributes considerable significance to the memory motif of Rock Candy Mountain, for it is referred to three

times and provides the closing comment of the text. It is also the incident that provides the material for the short story, "Two Rivers," that Stegner published later in his volume, The Women on the Wall.

On this particular day, the family takes a rare trip to the nearby Bearpaw Mountains, and Bruce is beset by memory from the start, his mind catching on a "memory from a time before there was any memory . . ." (p. 207). The whole trip is shrouded in the mystery and ambiguity of recollection. At the beginning of the trip, Bruce is bothered by a memory that he is right on the edge of but cannot quite recover. When they run across a giant milk snake with a half-swallowed gopher in its mouth, Bo kills it while Bruce is struck by the fact that "before they got to the mountains at all, he had something to remember about the trip" (p. 207). But what bothers Bruce is the return of an earlier remembered childhood sensation of two rivers--one hot, the other cold, running together--and these become mingled with other sensations as the family lies happy and contented high above the golden plains of wheat:

. . . over the whole canyon, like a haze in the clear air, was that other thing, that memory or ghost of memory, a swing he had fallen out of, the feel of his hands sticky with blackberries, his skin drinking cool shade and his father's anger--the reflection of ecstasy and the shadow of tears. (Rock Candy Mountain, p. 211)

But it is the "things that made his skin prickle" that trigger the memory; "it was his skin that remembered."

Perhaps, the Bearpaw trip becomes a crowning memory because, for one thing, it marks the summit, the high point of family unity and happiness--their last free moments together before their descent into tragedy. Bruce recalls again this trip when, at the end of Rock Candy Mountain, he climbs the Mill Creek Canyon to pick flowers for his dying mother:

There was something lost and long forgotten stirring in the undergrowth of his memory. Something far back, as far back as Saskatchewan Then he had it. The Bearpaws, the picnic they had taken from the homestead when he was very young. And he himself, then, as now, had been smothered by a memory . . . this haunting sense of familiarity, this dream within a dream. Memory was a trap, a pit, a labyrinth. It tricked you into looking backward, and you saw yourself in another avatar, smaller and more narrow-visioned but richer in the life of the senses, and in that incarnation too you were looking back. You met yourself in your past, and the recognition was a strong quick shock, like a dive into cold water. (p. 498)

When Bruce recovers from this reverie, he feels a little drunk, dizzy,

as sick as Proust and as curst as Butler. But he didn't exactly understand what he meant by it, and his mind shied away, wary after that tottering moment when memory had opened under him like a gulf and the solidities of the unknown world, the comfortable assumptions of his own identity, had slipped out of reach and left him poised on the brink of the unknowable. (p. 499)

Skirting the edges of some rather deep Freudian pits, here, Stegner has Bruce still striving for meaning in memory when he attends his father's funeral at the novel's close:

His past was upon him, the feeling he had had two or three times that he bore his whole family's history in his own mind,

and he remembered the time when he had gone with his mother and father on a picnic to the Bearpaw Mountains, the wonder and delight of his childhood, and the shadow behind it of the things that his mind had caught from infancy, from other times, from some dim remoteness that gave up its meaning slowly and incompletely. (p. 563)

Of course, these passages come from the end of the novel, that portion referred to as "half hearted Thomas Wolfe" by Joseph Warren Beach.⁴⁸ And even Howard M. Jones, who generally lauds the book as a major novel, feels that his "occasional (and innocent) attempts to write like Thomas Wolfe . . . jar with the geniality and strength of the rest of the narrative." Jones thinks that the novel's truth and strength exist in spite of the style, not because of it.⁴⁹

There is no doubt that Stegner's analysis tends to overcome song, and compared to the exalted soaring found in the rhapsodic passages of a Proust or a Wolfe, Stegner's prose may seem like flying inside the hangar. Beach calls it "a uniform soft middle style, a trifle hesitant and apologetic, and not remarkable for either beauty or precision." Beach further claims that Stegner does "not greatly command the finer tools of irony, suggestion, pathos, or intellectual abstraction, which variously serve in the masters to give esthetic point to a neutral subject."⁵⁰ Perhaps, but

⁴⁸ Joseph Warren Beach, "Life Size Stegner," Rev. of The Big Rock Candy Mountain by Wallace Stegner, New York Times Book Review, 26 September 1943, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Howard M. Jones, Rev. of The Big Rock Candy Mountain by Wallace Stegner, Saturday Review, 2 October 1943, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Beach, p. 4.

Stegner, on the other hand, never gushes. He would probably not even try to compete with the unedited geniuses of excess--a Wolfe or a Whitman, for instance. Also, the terms, "soft," "middle," and "apologetic" may serve his aesthetic better than Beach realized--might be translated into "love," "moderation," and "honesty," old time-honored verities anywhere. One thing for certain, his subject is not "neutral." The poignancy and truth come out of the heart and genuine feeling of one who has suffered with his subject, of one whose motives are grounded in love. And that is what the reader senses in Rock Candy Mountain, for it is Stegner's most powerful novel.

"The Blue Winged Teal" and "The City of the Living," on the other hand, are two short stories that produce a high degree of poetic effect from unpoetic material. Both stories narrow their focus to the father-son relationship, though one is the inverse of the other in that "The City of the Living" emphasizes an all-consuming love and devotion of the father for the son while "The Blue Winged Teal" extends the familiar father-son hostility of Rock Candy Mountain. "The Blue Winged Teal" is an ugly duckling of a story in many ways. It is Stegner's most "grotesque" piece of fiction. It has its setting in a run-down "murky hole" of a bar in Salt Lake City, managed by a run-down shell of a man, John Lederer, who is the duplicate of the old Bo Mason in Rock Candy Mountain. Its bizarre incongruities are symbolized by the odors of roast duck, toilet disinfectant, and the cheap

perfume of his father's mistress--by the sound of clicking pool balls, the comings and goings of crude customers, and the guttural utterances of the German cook, Schmeckebier, who prepares a last supper-like duck roast for the "family" --himself, John, and his son, Henry. It is at once a parody of, yet touching tribute to, the memory of the dead mother. The delicate wings of the teal, the father's clumsy reference to the mother's hand-painted china--these are the only tokens of beauty in the story which otherwise develops out of the squalor of the pool hall--hardly the stuff of poetry. Yet, nowhere has Stegner more effectively employed the genius of simplicity to bring about poetic truth. The momentary uniting of father and son in the ghost of the dead mother is the point of the story. The truth that emerges illuminates their souls in the divine light of love even though both are made uncomfortable by self realization:

It was a cold, skin-tightening shock to realize that the hound eyes were cloudy with tears. The rubbing hand went over them, shaded them like a hatbrim, but the mouth below remained distorted. With a plunging movement his father was off the stool.

"Oh, God damn!" he said in a strangling voice, and went past Henry on hard, heavy feet, down the steps and past Billy Hammond, who neither looked up nor broke the sad thin whistling.

Schmeckebier had swung around. "Vot's duh matter? Now vot's duh matter?"

With a short shake of the head, Henry turned away from him, staring after his father down the dark poolhall. He felt as if orderly things were breaking and flying apart in his mind; (City of the Living, p. 20)

"The City of the Living," too, derives its beauty from ugliness--from the foul air of sickness. It features a father

stranded in Egypt with his only son, who is stricken with typhoid. The story gains an exotic flavor and extra dimension of universality by setting a contemporary western executive against an ancient Egyptian background. The contrast, here, lends itself to the series of paradoxes and ironies that contribute to the story's dramatic force. But the real power and beauty of the story comes from the spiritual awakening that takes place within the father, who is forced to examine his soul under the shadows of the country's vultures. Trying desperately to divert his mind from fear and anxiety, the father digs out his briefcase, a symbol of western bureaucracy with its records and charts; it is a record of his life, revealing everything necessary to modern man, especially insurance--carefully documented, ordered, insulated and inoculated from life and from God. He is the unknown citizen. Then he takes up a piece of paper, wanting to write a letter to anyone:

I have spent my life avoiding entanglements
 I heaved a sigh of relief when Ruth left.
 The only person I have cared about is this
 boy in the next room, and he is half a
 stranger. You should hear the machinery
 creak when we try to talk to each other,
 and I have to go and bring him into this
 rotten country where everybody is stuffed
 to the eyes with germs (City of the
Living, p. 29)

But his night watch, set in a purgatorial time frame in which he must administer pills at short intervals, implies repentance and expiation. Though he brings his Western rationality to bear on his hallucinations, he nevertheless is a changed

man when he awakes to find the fever gone and his son on the way to recovery. Now, for the first time, he sees life in the city of death:

It was innocent and clean now, and the river that when they first came had seemed to him a dirty, mud-banked sewer looked different too. It came down proudly, one of the really mighty rivers, pouring not so much out of the heart of the continent as out of all backward time, and in its yellow water it carried the rich silt for delta cotton fields, the bilharzia worms to infect the sweating fellahin at the ditch heads, the sewage and the waste, the fecundity, feculence. The river was literally Egypt . . . Incomprehensibly tears jumped to his eyes. (p. 36)

This experience has put him in touch with the realities of life, its complexities, its contradictions, its impurities. When he later sees the young Moslem boy in prayer, he is touched by the dignity of the figure whose "every move was assured, completely natural." Then he realizes that he had been doing "something like praying all night, praying to modern science, . . . not to God, not to Allah, . . . but to some laboratory technician in a white coat. To the Antibiotic God" (p. 39). Yet, he recognizes the limitations of his god, that those forces responsible for his son's life go beyond mere medicine. And thus the simple fortitude of the primitive in ancient prayer is the symbol of eternity, of a power behind and beyond Western technology.

"The City of the Living" is one of Stegner's more "Godly" stories in which the protagonist is fronted squarely with the issue of depth, or meaning in life, and allowed a clear-eyed epiphany. The spirit of Eastern mysticism is its haunting

force. Typical of Stegner's best stories, the symbolism is worked in unobtrusively; and though the entire story is rendered from the interior, it never loses itself in abstraction which is lightly contained by the rational and the concrete.

But to return to Wolf Willow, which is one of Stegner's most representative works, reflecting his broad range of interests in its combination of history, fiction and essay. It is included in this section because a major portion of it, Part III, is fiction and because it is one of Stegner's more poetic expressions.

Wolf Willow consists of a series of removable parts, smoothly integrated. The primary unifying element is memory. Though the book is actually divided into four parts, Robert Canzoneri sees it as tripartite: the first part, memory plus history; the second part, memory plus a novella and a short story; and the third part memory plus history and contemplation--a coming to terms.⁵¹

Part I of the book, "A Question Mark in the Circle," is dominated by recollections of childhood where, in addition to the smells and fragrances recalled from youth, there is the poetry of landscape, places permanently set in the back of the mind that present disconcerting snags to the memory:

Expose a child to a particular environment
at his susceptible time and he will
perceive in the shapes of that environment

⁵¹ Canzoneri, p. 812.

until he dies. The perceptive habits that are like imprintings or like conditional responses carry habitual and remembered emotions. (p. 21)

Stegner cites as an example a jungly bend in the White Mud river, a place that turns up regularly in dreams that haunt him

by a sense of meanings just withheld, and by a profound nostalgic melancholy. Freudian implications suggest themselves But the Freudian and endocrine aspects interest me less than the mere fact that this dead loop of river, known only for a few years, should be so charged with potency in my unconscious. (p. 22)

He is also struck by the fact that only that place and a few images around it should turn up in the dreams rather than places from the prairie, images that he brings "up off the typewriter onto the page. They lie in me like underground water; every well I put down taps them."

Thus one is reminded somewhat of Hemingway's "good" and "bad" places in rivers that occur regularly in the dreams of his heroes or even of those lyrical passages from Wordsworth's Prelude which substantiate the poetry of landscape as seen during childhood, the "fair seed time of the soul . . . fostered alike by beauty and fear" or of Wordsworth's river that ". . . from his alder shades and rocky falls/And from his fords and shallow, sent a voice/That flowed along my dreams."⁵²

Stegner, however, attempts to dispel any celestial light that might envelop his childhood spots of time by treating

⁵² William Wordsworth, "The Prelude," Wordsworth: Selected Poetry, Ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 186.

them in the light of analysis or scrutiny:

. . . it is hardly glamour that brings me back, a middle-aged pilgrim, to the village I last saw in 1920. Neither do I come back with the expectation of returning to a childhood wonderland-- or I don't think I do. (p. 5)

That this pretense to realism is not completely convincing, however, is one of the attractive features of the book. Analysis is always tinged with feeling. The reader senses that Stegner is a spy in his own country who really wants asylum. Such is the ambiguity that accompanies this adventure into nostalgia or this mission to banish the ghosts of memory:

But memory, though vivid, is imprecise, without sure dimensions, and it is as much to test memory against adult observation as for any other reason that I return. What I remember are low bars overgrown with wild roses, cut bank bends, secret paths through willows, fords across the shallows, swallows in the clay banks, days of indolence and adventure where space was as flexible as the mind's cunning and where time did not exist. (p. 6)

This passage illustrates the basic format of the essay and historical portions of Wolf Willow. At its best it is poetic exposition that balances first person analysis with descriptive scene.

And it is the scenery that surprises Stegner in the book's opening pages as he "pokes the car tentatively eastward" . . . looking "for desolation" but finding none. What unfolds is a vivid prairie panorama:

The plain spreads southward below the Trans-Canada Highway, an ocean of wind-troubled grass and grain. It has its remembered textures: winter wheat heavily headed, scoured and shadowed as if schools of fish move in it; spring wheat with its young seed--rows as precise as combings in a boy's wet hair; gray brown summer fallow with the weeds disked under

Across its empty miles pours the pushing and shouldering wind, a thing you tighten into as a trout tightens into fast water. It is a grassy, clean, exciting wind, with the smell of distance in it, and in its search for whatever it is looking for it turns over every wheat blade and head, every primrose . . . For over the segmented circle of earth is domed the biggest sky anywhere, which on days like this sheds down on range and wheat and summer fallow a light to set a painter wild, a light pure, glareless, and transparent.

The nesting mallards move in my memory too, pulling after them shadowy, long-forgotten images. The picture of a drake standing on his head with his curly tail-feathers sticking up from a sheet of wind-flawed slough is tangled in my remembering senses (pp. 7, 8)

Although the fish metaphors are a little forced in the first two passages, the sky passage a little melodramatic, the collective imagery of the four is rigorous, with the rhapsodic contained by the rational eye. There is, too, an underlying excitement here that effectively captures the spirit of the plains. This last passage, with its soothing lines, presents a picture that fosters not only beauty but fear as Stegner nears the homesite:

I don't want to find, as I know I will if I go down there, that we have vanished without a trace . . . to know that our

protective pasture has been pulled down to let the prairie in, or that our field which stopped at the line and so defined a sort of identity and difference now flows southward into Montana without a break as restored grass and burnouts With the clarity of hallucination I can see my mother's weathered, rueful, half-laughing face, and hear the exact tone, between regretful and indomitable, in which she always met misfortune or failure: "Well," she will say, "better luck next time!"
(p. 9)

But as conscientious narrator, Stegner recognizes the soft spots in the terrain that warn of too much sentimentality. He steers the reader around them, concluding that, "I had better leave it alone, the town is safer."

At this point, the narrator begins to explore his hometown, what he chooses to call "Whitemud," and it is here that the book becomes more analytical as Stegner continues to resist the mellow tug of nostalgia by trying to disarm memory:

Because it is not shared, the memory seems fictitious, and so do other memories: the blizzard of 1916 that marooned us in the schoolhouse for a night and a day, the time the ice went out and brought both Martin's dam and the CPR bridge in kindling to our doors, the games of fox-and-geese I have used those memories for years as if they really happened. have made stories and novels of them. Now they seem uncorroborated and delusive

Sitting in the sticky-smelling, nostalgic air of the Greek's confectionery store, I am afflicted with the sense of how many whom I have known are dead, and how little evidence I have that I myself have lived what I remember. (p. 15)

In addition, there is at this point in Wolf Willow a noticeable effort on Stegner's part to interpret his own experience

in terms of the broader cultural and historical development of the town and the region and to relate his own particular identity to the universal as in the closing of Chapter One where he refers to himself in the third person:

And he has a fixed and suitably arrogant relationship with his universe, a relationship geometrical and symbolic. From his center of sensation and question and challenge, the circle of the world is measured, and in that respect the years of experience I have loaded upon my savage have not altered him. Lying upon a hillside where I once sprawled among the crocuses, watching the town herd and snaring May's emerging gophers, I feel how the world still reduces me to a point and then measures itself from me. Perhaps the meadowlark singing from a fence post--a meadowlark whose dialect I recognize--feels the same way. All points on the circumference are equidistant from him; in him all radii begin; all diameters run through him; if he moves, a new geometry creates itself around him.

No wonder he sings. It is a good country that can make anyone feel so. (p. 19)

This passage illustrates one of the poetic effects of the book--how Stegner's meadowlarks, gophers, and crocuses, for instance, lighten the burden of abstraction and help simplify a complex idea.

While Part I is mostly reflective essay, Part II is primarily history. Its title is "A Preparation for Civilization" and its nine chapters offer a colorful survey of the region's turbulent settling--one that features fur traders, Indians, surveyors, and mounted police. Stegner shows here special regard for the courage, integrity, and remarkable competence of the surveyors who staked out the 49th parallel

(The Medicine Line) and of the handful of Canadian officials who helped tame the region's diverse factions: the fur traders, the whiskey runners, the Metis or French-Indian half-breeds, the "wolfers" or professional wolf trappers, and the many Indian tribes--the Blackfoot, the Crees, the Tetons, the Assiniboin, the Crow, the Snake, and the Sioux, to name a few.

Stegner documents this section with passages from the journals of such men as explorers Lewis and Clark; Hudson Bay clerk, Isaac Cowie; and soldier of fortune, Captain W. F. Butler, an Irish officer. Stegner uses Captain Butler's description of the land as the prologue and lyrical starting point for section II:

no solitude can equal the loneliness of a night-shadowed prairie: one feels the stillness, and hears the silence, the wail of the prowling wolf makes the voice of solitude audible, the stars look down through infinite silence upon a silence almost as intense. This ocean [of prairie grass] has no past--time has been nought to it; and men have come and gone, leaving behind them no track, no vestige of their presence. Some writer, speaking of these prairies, has said that the sense of this utter negation of life, this complete absence of history, has struck him with a loneliness oppressive and sometimes terrible in its intensity. Perhaps so; but, for my part, the prairies had nothing terrible in their aspect, nothing oppressive in their loneliness. One saw here the world as it had taken shape and form from the hands of the creator. Nor did the scene look less beautiful because nature alone tilled the earth, and the unaided sun brought forth the flowers. (p. 37)

Butler shares in this passage some of the awe and reverence of those silent upon a peak in Darien, and the style here has

a kinship with Stegner's. Stegner, like Butler, owns a profound sense of history that helps dramatize his more lyrical passages in this section. And if the prose lacks sublimity, it has compensations in its vigorous utility. There is little sense of self indulgence, for the author seldom lingers in a scene without relating it to historical or divine significance. It is here, also, that Stegner brings his imagination to bear upon historical fact. Having claimed that "history is not truly remembered or written down until it has been vividly imagined,"⁵³ he then liberally punctuates this section with personal reflection and imaginative commentary:

The 49th parallel ran directly through
my childhood, dividing me in two . . .
.
it exerted uncomprehended pressures upon
affiliation and belief, custom and costume.
It offered us subtle choices even in
language (we stooked our wheat; across the
line they shocked it), and it lay among our
loyalties as disturbing as a hair in butter.
.
While I lived on it, I accepted it as I
accepted Orion in the winter sky, I did
not know that this line of iron posts was
one outward evidence of the coming of history
to the unhistoried Plains, one of the strings
by which dead men and the unguessed past
directed our lives. In actual fact, the
boundary which Joseph Kinsey Howard has called
artificial and ridiculous was more potent in
the lives of people like us than the natural
divide of the Cypress Hills had ever been
upon the tribes it held apart. (p. 85)

And when a large force of Sioux chiefs camp out near the site of "Whitemud" one autumn night, Stegner is there:

I know how that October river bottom would
have looked and smelled with the skin lodges
and the willow fires and the roasting meat--

⁵³ Intro. to A. B. Guthrie's The Big Sky (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), p. viii.

the smells of autumn and the muddy banks, the Indian summer pungency of drying leaves and rose hips, the special and secret smell of wolf willow, the glint of yellow and red leaves shaking down over the camp in a chilly night wind. It is an actual pleasure to think that their boots and moccasins printed the gray silt of those bottoms where my bare feet would kick up dust years later. (p. 118)

In closing out this section, Stegner regrets that as a child he had not discovered the region's rich heritage:

I wish I had known some of this. Then, solitary as a bear in a spider-webby, sweaty, fruit-smelling Saskatoon patch in Chimney Coulee on a hot afternoon, I might have felt as companionship and reassurance the presence of the traders, Metis, Indians, and Mounties whose old cabins were rectangles of foundation stones under the long grass, and whose chimneys crumbled a little lower every year. Kicking up an arrowhead at the Lazy-S ford, I might have peopled my imagination with a camp among the bends of the Whitemud and had the company of Sitting Bull, Long Dog, Spotted Eagle, Walsh, Macleod, Leveille--some Indian summer evening when smoke lay in fragrant scarves along the willows and the swallows were twittering to their holes in the clay cut-banks and a muskrat came pushing a dark-silver wedge of water upstream. (p. 121)

Nevertheless, it is this kind of passionate longing and feeling for the ghosts of the prairies that enables the author to capture the spirit of the frontier.

While imagination serves history well in this section, it is the power that transforms history into fiction in Part III, "The Whitemud River Range." This section is actually an extended definition of heroism. Entitled "Specification for a Hero," the first slim chapter prepares the way for the novella, "Genesis." Here Stegner recalls from boyhood the

folk culture that formed "an inhumane and limited code," gotten mostly "from the harsher frontiers, . . . mainly from our contacts with the cattle industry."

The history or the facts for "Genesis" come partly from Stegner's local research, partly from the memoirs of the town patriarchs such as Corky Jones, and partly from Stegner's own memories,

from hanging around in the shade of the bunkhouse listening to Rusty, who was supposed to be the second son of an earl, play the mouth organ

.
If we want to know what it was like on the Whitemud River range during that winter when the hopes of a cattle empire died, we had better see it through the eyes of some tenderfoot, perhaps someone fresh from the old country, a boy without the wonder rubbed off him and with something to prove about himself. (p. 138)

Rusty Cullen is the tenderfoot in "Genesis," then, who joins a group of ranchhands from the T-Down Bar ranch east of the Cypress Hills in the fall of 1906. Their mission is to round up the calves that could not be expected to winter on the range. Besides Rusty, Wolfer Schulz, ranch foreman Ray Henry, and cowboys Little Horn, Slip, Jesse, Spurlock, Buck and Panguingue are the principle characters in this winter odyssey that finds them at the mercy of Saskatchewan's worst winter--the winter of the blue snow. The plot line is simply Rusty's initiation into the brotherhood of cattlemen together with that of a rescue mission--out and back. But this is no ordinary western; Stegner tries to make a high art form out of it, putting his imaginative powers to work

in showing the reader "what it was like." The result is a frontier action narrative dense with authentic imagery of the cattle country. It is not so much lyrical as it is vivid, one that unites history, legend, and native experience.

On the way to the range Rusty's group gets its first indication of things to come when they encounter a returning body of cowhands from the Turkey Track Ranch:

They quoted signs and omens. They ran mittened hands against the grain of their ponies' winter hair, to show how much heavier it was than normal. They had seen muskrat houses built six feet high in the sloughs--and when the rats built high you could depend on a hard winter. Mounted police freighters reported a steady drift of antelope from the north across CPR tracks. (p. 150)

On this foreboding note, the T. Bar crew set about accomplishing the first step of their mission, which is to first find and then move the herd toward Horse Camp Coulee, the first feeding station on the return route. During that first week out, life is marked by hardship and beauty:

By day the labor and the cold and the stiffness of many hours in the saddle, the bawling of calves, the crackle and crunch of hoofs and wheels, the reluctant herded movement of two or three hundred cows and calves and six dozen horses, all of whom stooped at every patch of grass blown bare and had to be whacked into moving again. By night the patient circling ride around the herd, the exposure to stars and space and the eloquent speech of the wolves, and finally crowded sleep. (p. 165)

Nine days out the first big snow storm hits, marooning them for two days ten miles short of Horse Camp Coulee. The storm scatters the herd and threatens to blow down the tent.

Nevertheless, they manage after the storm to reach Horse Camp with 300 head in tow. But the next morning, incredibly, another more severe storm strikes and threatens the tent again. Desperate now, the crew decides to abandon the cattle and the saddle horses and head for the protection of the river bottom. At this point, the real drama begins:

He does not need to be told that what moves them now is not caution, not good judgment, not anything over which they have any control, but desperation. The tent will not stand much more, and no tent means no fire. With no horses left but the clydes [Clydesdale stallions] and one night pony, they will have to walk, and to reach either of the possible shelters, either Stonepile or Bates Camp, they will have to go north and west, bucking the wind that just now, in the pace of a dozen breaths, has seared his face like a blowtorch. (p. 190)

While Ray, Slip, and Jesse ride, Rusty, Spurlock, Little Horn, Buck, and Panguingue will walk the six miles behind the wagon, tied together so as not to lose themselves in the blinding snow. Now the reader finds himself squarely in the midst of a Saskatchewan blizzard via the consciousness of Rusty:

He watched it [wagon wheel] hypnotically, revolving slowly like the white waste of his mind His body lived only in its pain and weariness . . . and the air was full of voices wild and desolate and terrible as the sound of hunting wolves. . . . The voices of all the lost, . . . all the starving, freezing, gaunt, and haunted men who had ever challenged this country . . . heartless and inhuman, older than earth and totally alien, as savage and outcast as the windigo, the cannibal spirit, the wind dipped and swept upon them. . . . (p. 193)

One concludes, however, that Stegner's exterior imagery is more successful than this interior impressionism--the invoking of the wind spirit which is overdramatized.

The story ends with Rusty's rescue of Spurlock, his chief antagonist during the trip, who has stumbled and fallen just a few yards short of shelter. Rusty manages to force the staggering Spurlock the remaining distance and thus he finishes a man and a hero. But this ending is anticlimactic, for the novella taken in its entirety seems less a celebration of Rusty's heroism than a tribute to the spirit of the cowboys who risked their lives for

a bunch of cattle who would be better off where their instinct told them to go, drifting with the storm until they found shelter. For owners off in Aberdeen or Toronto or Calgary or Butte who never come out themselves and risk what they demanded of any cowboy for twenty dollars a month and found. (p. 193)

Chapter Three of this section, "Carrion Spring," in fact, is a continuation of this salute to the indomitable spirit of the cattlemen. It is a brief postscript to the disastrous winter of 1906-07 featuring the newlywed Henrys. After patching up a marriage strained by the long winter and a long separation, Ray and Molly re-affirm their love for each other and their true-grit determination to establish themselves in the cattle industry, even though cattle carcasses litter the spring landscape. In their hard choice, the Henrys reveal their grudging love for the hostile land.

Similarly, Stegner closes out Wolf Willow in mixed tones, as one with spiritually vested rights in the Saskatchewan

prairie. In his summing up statements in the book's last section, "Town and Country," Stegner remarks:

For her [his mother's] sake I have regretted that miserable homestead, and blamed my father for the blind and ignorant lemming-impulse that brought us to it. But on my own account I would not have missed it--could not have missed it and be who I am, for better or for worse. How better could a boy have known loneliness, which I must think a good thing to know? (p. 281)

As for Whitemud, itself, Stegner concludes in the book's epilogue that it has limited cultural prospects:

Unless North American tourists discover the beauty of the geometric earth and the enormous sky brimming with weather, and learn the passion of loneliness and the mystery of the prairie wind, Whitemud is going to have too little to work with; it will remain marginal in its community and its cultural life. (p. 306)

Earlier, Stegner had remarked that if he were a sociologist, he would go early to the community's refuse piles because, "for whole civilizations, we sometimes have no more of poetry and little more of history than this." But that is not true of Whitemud, at least. It can claim both a historian and a poet--Wallace Stegner.

CONCLUSION

One of the literary highlights of 1976 was the publication of Wallace Stegner's Spectator Bird, an event celebrated by Doubleday's full page advertisement in the June 13th New York Times Book Review.⁵⁴ The advertisement featured a photo portrait of Stegner surrounded by laudatory quotations:

Consistently elegant and entertaining . . .

One of the finest novelists of our time . . .

He writes not of the glands but of the heart . . .

This is Stegner at his mature best . . .

Perhaps now, in the fortieth year of Wallace Stegner's achievement, there will be more attempts to "place" Stegner as C. E. Eisinger tried to do at the half way point of Stegner's career in 1958.⁵⁵ For today there exist relatively few critical articles, most of these written since 1970.

Of these, three are of the survey type: those cited earlier by Eisinger and Canzoneri plus Merrill and Lorene Lewis's Wallace Stegner (The Western Writer's Series, 1972), which is the most complete and objective of the three.⁵⁶ Canzoneri's, on the other hand, is the most laudatory while

⁵⁴ New York Times Book Review, 13 June 1976, p. 21.

⁵⁵ "Twenty Years of Wallace Stegner," p. 110.

⁵⁶ Merrill & Lorene Lewis, Wallace Stegner, Western Writers Series, No. 4 (Boise: Boise State College, 1972).

Eisinger's is the most deprecatory. According to Mr. Stegner, one more survey type work is in process, one by Forrest Robinson for The Twayne Book Series.⁵⁷

Of the remaining articles, five have significant substance: the three already referred to, by Ahern, Peterson, and Twining; one by Lois Hundson entitled "The Big Rock Candy Mountain: No Roots and No Frontier" (South Dakota Review, Spring, 1971);⁵⁸ and Sid Jensen's, "The Compassionate Seer: Wallace Stegner's Literary Artist" (BYU Studies, Winter, 1975).⁵⁹

In his survey written before the publication of any of the California novels, Mr. Eisinger claims that Stegner (in 1958) is representative of that "time of hesitation," the time since the outbreak of World War II, which marked a withdrawal from politics and ideology by the major writers. None of the writers since then "has wanted to be alienated from his society," Eisinger goes on to say, and Stegner, like the others, has taken up the search for identity as his major theme; consequently, Stegner "is never more typical than when he affirms the goodness of life even though his characters know it is latent with horror." This rejection-acceptance pattern is traceable in all his fiction and

⁵⁷ Conversation, June 1976.

⁵⁸ Lois Hudson, "The Big Rock Candy Mountain: No Roots and No Frontier," South Dakota Review, 9 (Spring 1974), 3-13.

⁵⁹ Sid Jensen, "The Compassionate Seer: Wallace Stegner's Literary Artist," BYU Studies, Winter 1975, pp. 248-262.

"sometimes brings Stegner to an ill-defined middle way."

Eisinger then develops this concept of "middlism" into his major charge against Stegner. Middlism has, as its consequence, uncertainty and an unwillingness to make choices. As a result, polarities in American life tend to disappear as society moves toward dead center. And Stegner, standing in the midst of that society, has "not so much seen it as experienced it." Trying to record the life of man and society from within, Stegner lacks the "consistent vision and true perspective" of one who sees it from without--such as Joyce. Eisinger concludes that "Joyce knew what Stegner has not yet learned: that the artist must be alone."⁶⁰

This assessment, which is obviously flawed, might better represent the critical state of mind responsible for Stegner's neglect than a valid judgment of Stegner's achievement at the time. Nevertheless, Eisinger's criticism was more appropriate at Stegner's mid-career than it is now, for it could not then take account of the California novels in which Stegner's social and moral positions are much more forcefully asserted. Eisinger is generally correct in positioning Stegner in the middle, but incorrect in equating the middle with uncertainty that carries the implication of moral cowardice--the fear of choice. In doing so, he assumes a too simplistic, black and white morality, the either-or syndrome. Eisinger apparently prefers polarities, but given the complexities of the age,

⁶⁰ Eisinger, pp. 110-116.

it is all the more unreasonable to expect a keen intelligence to embrace a polarity. Middlism in itself is not evil and Stegner in his more recent novels is most firm, unequivocal, and even militant about his middle position which, admittedly, seems to be working its way to the right. His position here might be called "militant moderation." But then the sixties made all old time liberals look like reactionaries. It was not that they had changed. Quite the contrary. They stayed where they were, but the political ground shifted under them--to the left. In sum, middlism need not be fence-straddling. It is, in Stegner's case, most consistent with our Hellenic, Judeo-Christian heritage and the cardinal virtues of moderation and rationality. Eisinger's charge of "ill defined" middlism is, of course, somewhat more valid as applied to the early Stegner. On the other hand, Eisinger is right about the presence of the identity theme in Stegner's works. In that sense, Stegner is "representative" not only of the time of which Eisinger speaks, but of the twentieth century in general. But one will infer from the collective criticism that Stegner is not considered part of the mainstream of American fiction--especially the stylistic mainstream. He is supposed to be in the realist camp, which makes him somewhat of an anachronism. Stegner, though, seems to be more comfortable as an anachronism than as a chaser of literary fads.

The other part of Eisinger's complaint--that Stegner, being too much a part of society, lacks a "consistent and

true perspective" and is therefore unable to see it--is based on the fallacious principle that only those outside of society, those who are "alone," can see that society with true perspective. But while the loners or the outsiders might have the advantage of detachment and isolation which is supposed to promote objectivity, the insider has the advantage of experience and intimacy of acquaintance which promotes compassion and a sense of responsibility. Actually, Stegner is both--at once an isolated and detached literary man and a suburbanite. It is hard to find a better perspective than that of one who is both insider and outsider, as Flannery O'Connor notes in "The Fiction Writer and His Country." for one who writes knowingly about his society from the inside paradoxically becomes an outsider, "an exile from that world."⁶¹

Nevertheless, Eisinger's general charge of middlism reflects a certain stigma that Stegner has not escaped, one that tends to identify him with the literary, social, and academic establishments--enough to make him suspect with a good number of the literati who seem to prefer the non-academic, undisciplined and more sensational mavericks to the academic respectability and the moderate/conservative literary and social views of a Wallace Stegner. Perhaps, too,

⁶¹ Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," What Is the Short Story, Eds. E. Current-Garcia and W. R. Patrick (Revised; Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1968), p. 133.

Stegner has not suffered enough as a writer, for he is one who seems to have been most comfortable and successful in his associations with the establishments. One wonders, for instance, what Merrill Lewis means when he claims that "Stegner's long tenure at Stanford and his connections with academia [sic] are most difficult biographical matters to assess."⁶² It is difficult to assess, too, the ambiguity of tone in the following passage which marks a brief departure from the detachment which otherwise characterizes Lewis's comments:

His success as a teacher of creative writing, as well as his success as a writer, has given him opportunities and honors that not many regional writers have obtained. He has had access to major libraries for research; he has had the opportunity to travel and the leisure to write.⁶³

Besides begging a question as to whether Stegner can rightfully be called a regional writer here, Lewis seems to be suggesting that Stegner's advantages should be weighted against him and discounted accordingly when taking the measure of his accomplishment.

Mr. Ahern, on the other hand, opens his article by noting that the hallmark of literature in the first half of our century has been stylistic innovation. He is of the opinion that "myth and stylistic one-upmanship and the various

⁶² Lewis, p. 8.

⁶³ Lewis, p. 8.

permutations of the 'dark' tradition of American letters have been overemphasized by critics, and this in turn explains why Wallace Stegner has not received the recognition he deserves." Although his Angle of Repose won the "nationalistic" Pulitzer in 1971, the "Brahman National Book Award committee in that year ignored it," Mr. Ahern observes. He then cites Robert Canzoneri, who supports his contentions that Stegner's failure to pursue literary fads has cost him critical acclaim:

Since in Stegner's work, neither style, method, nor form is exotic, doctrinaire, violent, or romantic, and since none of his fiction depends upon myth, or neotheology, what is there to write about?⁶⁴

Since 1970, however, critics are finding more to say about Stegner's art. Indeed, one can sense the beginning of a cult with such Stegner enthusiasts as Canzoneri, Ahern, Peterson, and Sid Jensen.

But perhaps Canzoneri's observation that "it is not easy to find a handle for Stegner," is useful in defining Stegner's professional as well as his artistic status and might well point out some reason for this lack of recognition referred to. Stegner's proven versatility as historian, novelist, journalist, and essayist--as writer, teacher, and critic--is at once an asset and a liability in prompting recognition for his achievement. While he is in

⁶⁴ Ahern, p. 11.

one sense a jack-of-all genres and the master of many, he has not, with the possible exception of his most recent novels, committed himself to any one genre or to any one type of novel, for instance. This lack of continuity and diffusion of interests makes it difficult for those looking for "handles," while accommodating those looking for an excuse to ignore his achievement in fiction.

It is not that Stegner's eleven novels would not be enough on which to establish a reputation. Fitzgerald established his on a mere five novels, Wolfe on only four. But Fitzgerald and Wolfe were instant successes who struck early in their careers and had the benefit of Maxwell Perkins' paternal, loving care. Like meteors, they cut a brilliant but brief swath across the sky. And the legendary personality and the public notoriety of a Fitzgerald, a Wolfe, or a Hemingway complements the literary reputation also. Faulkner, by contrast, shunned the limelight and his genius, consequently, was slow in being recognized, and unlike Wolfe, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway, Faulkner built a mythology around Yoknapatawpha county and developed it throughout twenty novels. Stegner, though, cannot claim personal notoriety, early success, or a commitment to place with an accompanying and developing mythology.

Nevertheless, one must keep in mind that Angle of Repose did win the Pulitzer; and Ahern and Jensen have made claims for its being Stegner's best novel by attempting to show how

it marks the culmination of his artistic career. For Mr. Ahern, its superiority is due to its innovative narrator device; for Mr. Jensen, its superiority is due to its achievement of the middle ground, by its blend of history and fiction. And in their general praise for the book, these two critics would seem to join the many reviewers who rallied around Angle of Repose by 1972.

Nevertheless, this writer, while acknowledging the obvious merits of Angle of Repose, is not in agreement with those who claim that it is Stegner's best novel. Though one should understand that choosing a "best" novel is always going to be somewhat academic, he might think of Stegner's literary achievement as highlighted by three works with Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943) at one pole, Angle of Repose (1972) at the other, and Wolf Willow (1956) in the middle.

This approach is, of course, oversimplified. But Big Rock Candy Mountain and Angle of Repose are polarities in that they represent Stegner's "western authentic" and his "western synthetic" respectively, to borrow terms from the author, himself.⁶⁵ The first comes from first-hand, genuine experience of the past, the second from "second hand," synthetic experience of the present--that is to the extent that Angle of Repose is a product of sophistication/education and to the extent that the Ward saga is not Stegner's own, but one his narrator is

⁶⁵The Sound of Mountain Water, pp. 223-250.

attempting to process, to manipulate. In addition, the setting is California, which is about "as much the West as Florida is the South" according to Stegner. This is not to discredit the California novels, for Stegner is most successful in getting genuine effects from "synthetic" materials; and though he has reconciled himself to retirement in this artificial land, he is no less able to see and criticize its follies. California is the symbol of the synthetic syndrome, and a good place from which to take shots at the synthetic present. As both insider and outsider, Stegner is especially well equipped to assess that culture--better, at least, than the synthetic disciplines such as sociology, which is satirized in portions of Angle of Repose.

Nevertheless, while Angle of Repose is all the technical things that its supporters would claim for it, it is by its conception--as are all the California novels--self limiting. The difference between the California novels and Wolf Willow or Rock Candy Mountain is the difference between the Allstons and the Masons, that is, the difference between the hot-house, domesticated, synthetic of California and the prairie winds of Saskatchewan.

In this respect, it is interesting to note some of Stegner's remarks in Wolf Willow that acknowledge his debt to his childhood on the plains:

I may not know who I am, but I know
where I'm from. I can say to myself

that a good part of my private and social character . . . has been . . . scored into me by that little womb village and the lovely, lovely, exposed prairie of the homestead. However anachronistic I may be, I am a product of the American earth, and in nothing quite so much as in the contrast between what I knew through the pores and what I was officially taught.
(p. 23)

Later, after claiming that "education tried inadequately and hopelessly to make a European out of me," he calls attention to Willa Cather, whose education encouraged her to be a "good European." However, she was a first rate novelist only when she dealt with what she knew from Red Cloud and the things she had "in place of all that," and

if, as it is often said, every novelist is born to write one thing, then the one thing that Willa Cather was born to write was first fully realized in My Antonia. (p. 125)

There is some irony in these remarks in that they are quite applicable to Stegner's own career, for Stegner in his lifetime came by a good deal of culture and education, working his way gradually eastward from Salt Lake City, to Iowa City, to Harvard and Toronto before returning to the West and settling near San Francisco. And, of course, this last statement by Stegner begs the question: what is the one thing Stegner was born to write?

This writer proposes in summation and closing that if there is a "one thing," it is not Angle of Repose but either The Big Rock Candy Mountain or Wolf Willow. Whitemud is to Stegner what Red Cloud was to Cather or what Jefferson was

to Faulkner. The difference is that Stegner did not choose to sustain a fiction based on White Mud and its surrounding Saskatchewan plains. The Big Rock Candy Mountain, however, was Stegner's one novel that demonstrated promise and the beginning of a fiction that could have had him representing the fictional Northwest in much the same way as Cather represented the Midwest or Faulkner the South. Stegner's physical landscape, of course, would have dwarfed that of Cather's or Faulkner's, but, as Lois Hudson points out, Stegner did not develop a mythical landscape anywhere near the size of Faulkner's. Both Faulkner and Cather had historical and cultural fact and stability on which to build a fiction in contrast to Stegner's rootlessness. A. B. Guthrie, though, claims that Stegner is one "who got a place in his system and as a man can't get it out, no matter that he's long since moved away."⁶⁶ Home might be "what you can take away with you," but its spiritual roots remain anchored in Whitemud. No two books bear this out better than The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Wolf Willow.

And if forced to choose between the two, then this writer would pick Wolf Willow. It is not that Wolf Willow is better than The Big Rock Candy Mountain. In fact, it does not own the tender pathos or the same degree of intimacy as does The Big Rock Candy Mountain. But Wolf Willow is the book that

⁶⁶ A. B. Guthrie, Review of Wolf Willow, Reporter, 22 November 1962, p. 52.

best represents Stegner. It is his most original and representative work, situated symbolically in the middle--at mid-career. But it is in the "middle" in the best sense of the word--synthesis and balance. In this one book Stegner combines his diverse interests in history, essay, and fiction. Like The Big Rock Candy Mountain it has the same spiritual reference point in Whitemud while Genesis demonstrates a similar bit of the Western epic. But while it has an obviously greater kinship with The Big Rock Candy Mountain, it has some of the rhetoric and polemic of Angle of Repose. It also features a first person narrator host who is anxious to inform the reader about what he is doing and how he is doing it:

If in inventing this individual I put into him a little of Corky Jones, and some of the boy Rusty whose mouth organ used to sweeten the dusty summer shade of the Lazy-S bunkhouse, let it be admitted that I have also put into him something of myself (p. 138)

Only here there is an additional measure of clarity in that there are no masks, for the essay form is one that seems to more comfortably accommodate Stegner's first person "I" than do the narrator devices in the California novels. Like Angle of Repose, too, Wolf Willow represents an innovative structure, one that unites the different genres in memory. It combines, then, the most characteristic features of both western authentic and synthetic. But Wolf Willow goes beyond this in characterizing Stegner, for the cardinal merit of his career has been his ability to successfully combine

and reconcile his divergent interests. In doing so, he has gained a broad base of respect. Bernard Kalb, for instance, has noted that Stegner has shown a splendid disregard for the theory that creative writing and teaching do not mix. Stegner claims that he has

never understood why American novelists have to pretend to a Neanderthal ignorance, or why professors need to be limited to a kind of eunuch's place in our letters.⁶⁷

Thus Stegner has served as congenial diplomat and reconciling force between these two supposedly antagonistic activities--teaching and creative writing. In similar fashion, Stegner has managed to harmonize history and fiction, the past and the present. He also presents a pleasing blend of western native horse sense and eastern sophistication. And finally, his art represents a sensible reconciliation between mysticism and realism, one that favors a clear eye. Wolf Willow, then, is an appropriate monument for this extremely versatile artist.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Mari Sandoz, "Prophet of the Far West," Saturday Review, 11 September 1954, p. 37.

⁶⁸ On April 11, 1977, Mr. Stegner's The Spectator Bird won the National Book Awards' fiction prize.

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